the losing edge

the tension between the technical and spectacle in sport

Ryann Ting
De La Salle University

Abstract

In the 2012 London Olympics, four different teams playing in women's double's badminton competed against each other in two of the most paradoxical professional games in history, where each team was visibly strategically trying to lose in order to avoid having to play a stronger team in the following round. Audiences and commentators panned the athlete's performances and condemned their behavior. Ultimately, the eight players were disqualified from the women's double's competition after being accused of "not using one's best efforts to win." The aim of this research is to problematize the reasoning behind this decision in relation to the role of the spectator in sport. The purpose of sport can be understood in relation to the two different categories: showmanship and gamesmanship. The choice to disqualify the women in the 2012 Olympics is reflective of a bias towards the showmanship aspect of sport, but it might be reconsidered when looked at from a broader perspective on the competition with a focus on gamesmanship.

Keywords

Spectacle, showmanship, gamesmanship, competition, game

Suri § Volume 7 No. 1 (2018): 47 - 53
Author's Correspondence to: ryann_ting@dlsu.edu.ph

http://suri.pap73.org/issue10/Ting_SURI_2018.pdf

It was at the 2012 London Olympics that eight badminton players—two South Korean pairs, one Chinese and one Indonesian team—were disqualified from the women's doubles for deliberately trying to lose their matches in order to avoid stronger teams in the next round. Their actions were considered by many to be "unforgivable" and a disgrace to the sport and the Olympic event. The outrage was so bad that shortly after, one of the Chinese players even announced that she would retire from the sport completely. Officially, the teams were all disqualified by the Olympic committee on the charges of "not using one's best efforts to win" and "conducting oneself in a manner that is abusive or detrimental to the sport." IOC vice president Craig Reedie, the former head of the international badminton federation, spoke out about the issue. "Sport is competitive," Reedie told the AP. "If you lose the competitive element, then the whole thing becomes a nonsense. [sic]. You cannot allow a player to abuse the tournament like that, and not take firm action" (ESPN.com news services, 2012). This decision, while understandable, is not unproblematic and it reveals a lot about the concept of sport and people's attitude towards it. Upon closer inspection, the charges held against these players may not be as immediately appropriate as it seems. The overwhelming condemnation of the athletes' actions in their respective matches is reflective of their bias as mere spectators.

To state that the players in question were not using their best efforts in their matches begs the question of what exactly constitutes "best efforts." Yes, the typical idea of good sportsmanship would entail playing to the best of one's ability. However, playing one's best can also factor in strategic plays, even when they appear to be self-detrimental in the short run. Basketball players would not be threatened with disqualification for missing a free throw or committing an intentional foul to get a chance at another possession, nor would chess players be reprimanded for sacrificing their queen. In a micro scale these kinds of acts are violations of the proper practice of playing to win but on a macro scale, they have a strategic purpose that is always aimed at securing a victory. It all really depends on how one frames it. Is the frame limited to a specific section of a matchup? The entire matchup? What if it were expanded beyond a single match and framed the entire tournament as a game, where the ultimate objective is to win a medal? It becomes harder and harder to draw a moral line.

The big dilemma began even before the matchup did, as an underdog Denmark team was able to pull off an unexpected upset over one of China's doubles teams, a team that just happened to be the heavy favorites (Peters 2012). Despite their stunning loss, this Chinese team remained, at least in the eyes of other competitors, the team to beat. Their loss also meant that the two Chinese teams might get the chance to square off in the semifinals of the knockout round rather than the gold-medal game, depriving China of the chance to win both gold and silver. China's only hope of securing both spots in the finals was for the other Chinese team to lose so that they are placed on opposite sides of the bracket.[1] This was the first time that the Olympics made use of the round-robin format for badminton as opposed to a straightforward knockout tournament. This format "can allow results to be manipulated to earn an easier matchup in the knockout round" (ESPN.com news services, 2012). The Chinese team was aware of this. Little did they know that their South Korean opponents had concurrently caught wind of the situation and had seen that losing would also benefit them with more favorable medal round matchups.

Any rational player will always choose to act according to the option that they believe to be the most ideal. The players were simply playing according to the situation at hand. An ideal system for any sports tournament would maintain the players' drive to play to win every match of the tournament. If the system in place permits the occurrence of a situation where losing a match can be seen as a winning strategy, then the failure lies, not with the players working according to the system, but with the system itself. The use of the round robin format all but guaranteed that this would happen. Given the upset of Denmark over the other favored Chinese team, the latter's best efforts in this situation now meant playing with the resolve to lose the match to improve their chances.

What's interesting about this case is that even in the absence of the drive to win the match, competition was still present. Despite VP Craig Reedie's comments, there was still very much a contest, just for a completely different goal. This slight variation completely changed the dynamic of the game. Suddenly, these players had privately found themselves in a game of "reverse badminton" which played out like this surreal waiting game of seeing who would

[1] Ibid.

break first and score a point. The dynamic is similar to the Filipino board games *dama* and *pedigama*.

Dama is a Filipino variant of checkers usually played with *tansans* or bottle caps. The game is not unlike traditional checkers in its goal to "eat" or "capture" all of the opponent's *tansans*. *Pedigama* is a variant on *dama*, played with the same pieces, board, and general rules. The only variation is the objective of the game. If the goal of *dama* is to "eat," the goal of *pedigama* is "to be eaten" as it is the one who first runs out of *tansans* who becomes the victor. In spite of the removal and reversal of the original objective, the competition is still moved forward by (1) the inability to skip or forego a move during one's turn, and (2) what's called the "forced to eat rule," which simply means that when one is in a position to make a "jump" on or "capture" the opponent, he or she must do so.

Badminton has no such rule in place to keep the players on the move. If the players' main objective was to lose the match, they technically could have just stood there like statues. They could have even dropped their rackets and laid down on the ground for the entire match, but they did not dare do that. This is because the big mover of this contest came from an unexpected source—the crowd. In fact, the presence of spectators may have shaped the events of this match more than any rule or regulation. The people watching, who included both the audience and the officials, had all come expecting a show of Olympic-level "regular" badminton. It was because of these spectators that the players had to maintain the pretense of regular gameplay. "Reverse badminton" automatically gained an unwritten rule, according to which the players, while playing as horribly as possible, must simultaneously look as though they were playing as well as they possibly could. Why? Because of the other unspoken rule of the game, which was that they had to keep the crowd at a certain level of satisfaction. Ultimately, despite their best efforts, they all ended up breaking this rule, which is what got them disqualified in the first place.

This brings us to the other case for the players' disqualification, their behaving in "a manner that is abusive or detrimental to the sport." This raises a few questions. Just what is it about sport that makes their actions feel so abusive to sports fans? What is sports for? Who is it for? There are a couple of ways to look at it. On one hand, there is "participatory sport" in which people take part for recreation, pleasure, and health benefits. Here the main objective is "the exertion and amusement of the participant." On the other hand, "spectator sport" prioritizes "the amusement and comfort of spectators" (Kyle 2014, 8).

Professional athletes perform in public spaces for people to see and are compensated with payment and other benefits. Finally, there is the "game." If there was going to be a perfectly objective way to approach the idea of a competition or sport, this would be it. Stripped down to the barest form of its dictionary definition, a "game" is simply "a structured form of play" (Merriam-Webster). It caters to no one, has no priorities, no underlying moral objectives or conditions. It is simply rules and gameplay.

The way we appreciate sports can also be understood in relation to two different categories: showmanship and gamesmanship. The former has to do with the use of sports to create spectacle for the enjoyment of a public audience. The latter is more concerned with the use of sports as an avenue to excel from a purely technical standpoint, whether it be through strategy or athleticism. The value placed on gamesmanship vis-à-vis showmanship can vary from sport to sport and even from athlete to athlete. For instance, professional wrestling is widely theatrical, completely favoring spectacle and dramatic tension over technical skill. Here, an athlete's performance is measured by how good a show was put on. For example, the WWE does not even promote wrestling as "sports" but as "sports entertainment." The wrestlers also do not refer to themselves as "wrestlers" or "athletes" but as "entertainers" or "superstars." Baseball, on the other hand, is highly technical in its appeal. In baseball, one of the greatest achievements in baseball is the "no-hitter," a decidedly unspectacular feat for one unfamiliar with the technicalities. But to one who understands the gravity of technical excellence involved in such a feat, it can be spectacular. The two ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Another good example of the tension between technical and spectacle can be found in Floyd Mayweather Jr.'s career. He is both famous and infamous for being arguably the best defensive boxer in the world. He does not charge in aggressively in his fights. He actually seems to avoid as much contact as possible, making use of every part of the ring and continuously moving around. He grabs his opponent when he needs to rest, starts moving around again, acts like he might throw a punch and fakes people out, then moves around the ring again. By doing this, he dictates the pace of a fight and protects himself at all times. But his style is so technical that it can be infuriating to some because it goes against our primal idea of a fight, which is to charge in, make contact, and hurt

someone. He would make an absolutely awful gladiator, if not for his larger-than-life personality. One might argue that his aggressive borderline disrespectful attitude in the public eye is almost a compensation for his unspectacular fighting style. Specifically noteworthy is his final fight, where he chose to compete against MMA fighter Connor Mcgregor, a man with little to no boxing experience, so that he could finally afford to veer away from his technical style and put on a good show. His own words to Jimmy Kimmel were,

> ...with this fight I'm going straight ahead. Normally, it's more taking my time and being cautious, but this time I'm going straight ahead because the fans deserve it....I feel like I owe the fans since me and Pacquaio didn't give the fans a blockbuster. Me and Conor should give the fans a blockbuster [sic]. (Mayweather 2017)

"You get into all sorts of strange precedents if people aren't satisfied with what they see," said Paul Deighton, chief executive of the London Olympic organizing committee (ESPN.com news services, 2012). Historically and culturally speaking, humanity has regarded sports, especially professional sports, with a proclivity towards the idea of spectacle. The Olympics is no exception. Almost every major event is held in a sports stadium specifically designed to seat tens of thousands of people. The original Roman Colosseum itself, which served as the architectural basis for every modern sports stadium, was engineered like an amphitheater for the purpose of entertainment. Besides serving as the stage for famous gladiator combat, it was also the venue for dramas, animal hunts, and public executions among other things. There was even a time when the Romans would flood the place in order to stage *naumachiae* or mock sea battles (Mueller 2011). Professional sports was and still remains only one channel among a wide network of spectacles presented to satisfy people's palates and when it fails to do so, as the badminton doubles had in London, it can only be met with disappointment and frustration.

Chairman Sebastian Co's statements about the incident further support the idea of sports' purpose as a spectacle when he called what happened "depressing," adding "who wants to sit through something like that?" (ESPN.com news services, 2012). If people were to value the Olympic event as a "participatory sport" or even as a "game," then the bane of having to "sit through something like that" would not even be a factor because the competitors do not

owe the audiences anything. In pointing such things out, my intention is not to throw spectator/professional sports under the bus. There is nothing inherently wrong with sports as a form of spectacle. However, it is important to understand how people's biases have influenced the semantic structure of sport as a construct.

The people who were so eager to condemn the players for their actions and the players who bore the heavy burden of shame for so long should know that players do not actually owe anything to the game or to the people watching it. These attitudes are merely ideas people have developed over time because they make it easier for everybody to enjoy a good show.

Works Cited

ESPN.com news services. 2012. "Players banned for throwing matches." ESPN. August 2. Accessed January 15, 2018. http://www.espn.com/olympics/summer/2012/badminton/story/_/id/8221408/2012-london-olympics-eight-badminton-players-disqualified-trying-lose-matches.

Kyle, Donald G. 2014. *Sport and spectacle in the ancient world*. Vol. 5. John Wiley & Sons.

Merriam Webster Dictionaries, s.v. "Game." Accessed June, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/game.

Mueller, Tom. 2011. "Secrets of the Colosseum." *Smithsonian.com*. January 1. Accessed January 15, 2018. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/secrets-of-the-colosseum-75827047/.

Mayweather Jr, Floyd. 2017. Interview by Jimmy Kimmel. *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. ABC. WABC, California. 15 August. Television.

Peters, Justin. 2012. "Why Were Those Olympic Badminton Players Trying To Lose? And Why Is the Sport So Dirty?" *Slate Magazine*. August 1. Accessed January 15, 2018. http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/fivering_circus/2012/08/badminton_scandal_olympics_2012_why_were_those_olympic_badminton_players_trying_to_lose_and_why_is_the_sport_so_dirty_.html.