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## **The Desirability of the Season Long Tournament: A Response to Finn**

**Cesar R. Torres and Peter F. Hager**

In an article recently published in the pages of this journal, Stephen Finn (8) offers an intriguing defense of the play-off system. Arguing against the criticisms that Nicholas Dixon (5) and William J. Morgan (20) direct at said system, Finn makes the case that, albeit not an ideal system for organizing athletic competition, it is still a good choice because it adds entertainment and drama to sport contests, thereby increasing the sport community's and society's interest in their outcomes.

Before Finn's analysis, the two main schemes through which athletic competition is typically organized (i.e., the play-off and the season long systems) had not received sufficient attention in the sport philosophy literature. Admittedly, Dixon and Morgan, as well as few others (13: p. 131), have previously referred to some strengths and weaknesses of both systems, but Finn's article is the first entirely devoted to the issue. While his locus is the play-off system, by implication he is also concerned with the season long system. Finn should be commended for his effort to systematize the philosophic study of the way in which athletic competition is typically organized. In this sense, he has opened up a line of inquiry that has implications not only for philosophers of sport but also for sportspeople, administrators, and policy makers.

This paper continues and, hopefully, adds a new perspective to the philosophic study of the organization of athletic competition. Since we find Finn's defense of and preference for the play-off system wanting, one of our goals in this paper is to respond to his arguments. A larger goal, however, is to demonstrate the superiority of the season long system as a method of organizing athletic competition. The paper is organized in four sections. First, we summarize Finn's case for the preferability of the play-off system. Second, we explain Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of a social practice and discuss it in relation to an interpretivist account to competitive sport and its central purpose. This analysis establishes the framework for the third section in which we respond to Finn's case. In doing so, we evaluate the play-off and the season long systems and establish the superiority of the latter. The final section provides a summary of our analysis. What this paper demonstrates is that the season long system is a more legitimate scheme for organizing athletic competition and deciding championships, one that respects more fully the defining elements of sporting contests.

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## Finn's Case in Favor of the Play-Off System

The defense of the play-off system mounted by Finn originates in Dixon's and Morgan's disapproval of this method of organizing athletic competition. On the one hand, Dixon objects to the play-off system because, by overly emphasizing the ability to perform under enormous pressure, it undermines the accurate measurement and determination of athletic superiority, which, for him, contradicts competitive sport's central purpose. On the other hand, both Dixon and Morgan disapprove of the alleged reasons behind the implementation of the play-off system. They consider that the values driving this implementation are not values internal to competitive sport such as athletic excellence or quality of play, but rather values that are external to it. Specifically, Dixon and Morgan contend that the play-off system is enacted exclusively for financial gain. The argument is that by prolonging competition, the play-off system creates postseason opportunities for increased profits. Finn calls Dixon's and Morgan's view "cynical," because they "imply that the only reason for using a less accurate measure of athletic excellence is financial gain" (p. 70). Since Finn believes that there are other legitimate reasons to justify the play-off system, he finds Dixon's and Morgan's rail against it unfounded.

In order to respond to Dixon and Morgan and build his case for the play-off system, Finn appeals to Sigmund Loland's (15) distinction and relationship between the structural and intentional goals of sport. According to Loland, the structural goal, which is common to all sports, is "to measure, compare, and rank two or more competitors according to athletic performance" (p. 10). It is worth noticing the similarity with Dixon's notion of competitive sport's central purpose. For both Dixon and Loland, the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence are at the core of competitive sport. Intentional goals are, on Loland's view, the multiplicity of personal reasons to partake in competitive sport. These might include skill, entertainment, health, political, or financial objectives to mention just a few candidates. Loland argues that intentional goals can be internal or external to sport. Skill and tactical proficiency are examples of the first while health and fame are examples of the second. Furthermore, Loland maintains that intentional goals can override the structural goal of sport (p. 11). This, according to Finn, is what Dixon and Morgan fail to notice. Consequently, they either do not take into consideration the intentional goals of competitive sport in evaluating the play-off system, or if they do consider it, as they seem to in the case of entertainment, they overlook such goals as impediments to the realization of competitive sport's central purpose.

In response, Finn argues that the intentional goal of entertainment as manifested by athletes, spectators, and officials is not only worthy of consideration, but also legitimizes the choice of the play-off system. When compared with the season long system, Finn goes on, the play-off alternative enhances the level of anticipation, drama, and excitement not only for those directly involved in the contest, but also for the expectant sporting community. Since competitive sport depends upon the interest of these people, Finn believes that the play-off system "deserves our support because the intentional goals of athletes and fans to partake in a meaningful experience may sometimes outweigh the structural goal of determining the proper ranking among athletes" (p. 71). Unlike Dixon and Morgan, Finn is willing

to sacrifice the structural goal of sport for intentional goals that are internal to competitive sport; more specifically, the goal of enjoyment. He admits, “I would rather have a season with a playoff system because it increases the enjoyment of sport while still being a good, although not the best, indicator of athletic excellence” (p. 72). Intellectually honest, Finn also admits that his defense “is thus far grounded on a subjective attitude concerning the goals of athletic contests” (p. 72). Pointing to the seemingly large number of sportspeople in the United States that favor the play-off system, he claims that his subjective preference for it is widely shared.

Besides his subjective proposition, Finn offers one more line of defense for the play-off system. Using Randolph Feezell’s (7) elaboration of sport as a practice pregnant with narrative potentialities that can inspire meaningful and connected living, Finn argues that the play-off system “could well offer a more meaningful and richer experience than a season-long championship” (p. 73). This is so because the play-off system breaks with the supposed monotony of the season long system’s series of games by culminating with an event that, by raising the stakes, stresses drama, tension, excitement, and interest. As Finn clarifies, while the season long system offer rich narrative paths for storytelling, “the playoff system provides us with, to put it simply, a better story” (p. 73). For him, the play-off system is to be preferred for its breviloquence, consummation, and exultation. These seem to be the qualities that make not only for better storytelling, but for better stories—stories that presumably provide the context and content for more fulfilling and meaningful living. In his own words, Finn’s preference for the play-off system is based on his “desire to play in or watch a more exciting game with higher stakes” (p. 74).

## MacIntyrean Social Practices and Interpretivism

Over the years, many sport philosophers have utilized the writings of virtue theorist Alasdair MacIntyre in their work, especially his discussions on the distinctions between (a) social practices and institutions and (b) the internal and external goods associated with them.<sup>1</sup> We believe these distinctions are important to this current discussion, but intend to present them here in a new way by relating them to elements of the interpretivist theory of sport that we hope will further clarify the above concepts and their significance for sporting communities.

In his celebrated book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines a social practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity (18: p. 187)

Since MacIntyre presents cricket (18: p. 191) and American football (18: p. 187) as examples of social practices, he at least implicitly seems to accept institutionalized sports as instances of social practices as defined above. Examples aside, there is good reason to believe MacIntyre would accept sports as social practices, as they are activities with exactly the kinds of internal goods he describes. In attempting to achieve excellence within a sport, individuals and teams must diligently

hone and master those skills that make their sport a unique activity. These are what Cesar R. Torres (32: p. 86) refers to as the “constitutive skills” of the sport—the skills that are most central to the comparative purpose of sporting contests and “define and shape the character of games” and sports as games. According to Torres, the constitutive skills “are the ones gamewrights presumably wanted to promote and, in terms of which, performers would test and distinguish themselves” (p. 85); “they exist to bring games [and sports qua games] to life, and in terms of such skills, players are to show their superiority” (p. 86). In short, the constitutive skills are the skills particular sports are primarily designed to test, and the ones through which excellence in that sport is to be attained.

Torres’ conception of constitutive skills is an element of the evolving interpretivist view of sport that has developed over the last ten years. Sport philosophers such as Nicholas Dixon (3; 4), J.S. Russell (23; 24), and Robert L. Simon (26; 27) have all contributed to the development of this view in an attempt to more thoroughly and accurately examine the relationship of sport and morality. Interpretivism is a form of what Simon (27) has called “broad internalism, which, as he defines it, “is the view that in addition to the constitutive rules of sport, there are other resources connected closely—perhaps conceptually—to sport that are neither social conventions nor moral principles imported from the outside” that can aid us in determining what is in the best moral interests of sports and sporting communities (27 p. 7).

More specifically, Simon states that an interpretivist theory such as the Dworkonian theory of sport adjudication developed by Russell in his article *Are Rules All an Umpire Has to Work With*, “derives the principles and theories underlying sport . . . from an appeal to the best interpretation of the game or an inference to the best explanation of its key elements” (27: p. 8). In further clarifying this definition, he notes that interpretivists hold that

Certain principles and theories must be *presupposed* if we are to make sense of key elements of sport, such as the rules, the skills that are tested, and possibly the history, traditions, and central elements of the ethos of particular sports. . . . The form of the argument [that an interpretivist might employ] is that a particular activity, competitive sport, would lack a point, be not fully intelligible, or make no sense (or at least less sense than otherwise) were not certain underlying principles taken as normative or as applying to the activity in question (27: pp. 8–9)

The notion of constitutive skills is one that can be used by interpretivists to explain the central role that certain skills play in defining particular sports and in creating athletic excellence within them. In addition, these primary skills can be portrayed as foundational internal goods of sports as MacIntyrean social practices. According to MacIntyre, such internal goods are inherent elements of formally organized social practices. They are “internal” because they can only be specified in terms of the particular practice in which they play a role and are only available to practice community members (18: pp. 188–189). Internal goods “provide both activity and enquiry within each practice with their *telos*” (17: p. 123). Thus, on MacIntyre’s view, it is the internal goods of a practice that the members of its practice community should oversee, protect, and look to when questions arise regarding conduct and change within that practice.

How is it that a sport's constitutive skills, as internal goods of excellence of that sport, help to establish its purpose? As previously stated, excellence within a particular sport is attained through masterful execution of the constitutive skills. These skills are the ones that are prescribed and permitted by the constitutive rules of the sport—the rules that, in Suitsian terms, set out the lusory means of each sport and require contestants to use less efficient rather than more efficient means when pursuing the sport's prelusory goal (29: p. 34–41).

The constitutive rules are, in turn, grounded in the particular “gratuitous logic” of that sport—the logic that must apply if we are to have a sport with specific kinds of challenges. For example, if the sport of football, or soccer as it is known in North America, is to exist, there must be a community of practitioners willing to adopt the lusory attitude and adhere to the logic of a sport that requires them to advance the ball, score, and defend their goals without the use of hands (goalkeepers notwithstanding). The constitutive rules of football explicitly detail how this logic is to be instantiated in play, and reveal a set of possible, legal actions through the prescription of certain less efficient means and proscription of other more efficient ones. As Torres states:

constitutive rules prescribe the avenues of access permitted in the pursuing of the prelusory goal of a game. This general framework promotes the creation of particular and specialized skills that are utilized to better negotiate resolutions of the artificial tests inherent in games (32: p. 85)

The constitutive rules of football thus allow players to defend, to control and advance the ball, and to make scoring attempts by using their feet, legs, chest, and head. These rules thus facilitate the creation and evolution of the skills of heading, chest and thigh trapping, and the varieties of passes and shots utilized in football. It is these skills that the members of football's sporting community recognize as the defining skills and internal goods of excellence of their sport. Furthermore, to the extent that excellence in football is defined by consistent exemplary execution of these constitutive skills in combination, they provide football and its sporting community with their *telos*.

Having identified Torres' constitutive skills as central internal goods of excellence of sports as MacIntyrean social practices, it is now important to contrast these with other goods available through sporting institutions, such as wealth, fame, and power. MacIntyre refers to these types of goods as “external good” because they are only contingently associated with social practices. Unlike internal goods which can only be experienced through participation in or strong acquaintance with a specific practice, external goods can be secured through other practices and activities. However, as Mike McNamee (19: pp. 75–76) points out, external goods may not be attained in as satisfying or as meaningful a manner by those who value particular practices like sports, because these individuals have a love and appreciation for their practices that they do not have for other practices from which they might accrue status, power, and riches.

As MacIntyre portrays them, external goods also tend to be scarcer for practice community members than the more basic internal goods of the practice. In *After Virtue*, he notes that:

External goods are . . . characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are indeed the outcome of

competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is good for the whole community who participate in the practice. So when Turner transformed the seascape in painting or W. G. Grace advanced the art of batting in cricket in quite a new way, their achievement enriched the whole relevant community. (pp. 190-191)

In sport, participants and knowledgeable spectators can all enjoy great performances and displays of skill mastery, but not everyone can be a professional athlete with a multimillion-dollar contract or a member of an elite championship team. These latter external goods are thus scarcer than the internal goods that any informed member of a sporting community can enjoy through their understanding of and participation in the practice, and, according to MacIntyre, are attained and distributed by institutions such as sport leagues and governing bodies. Ideally, it is the purpose of such institutions to garner resources and provide support (economic and otherwise) to the social practices they represent, and to appropriately distribute scarce external goods through well developed systems of rewards.

While, as McNamee (19: pp. 76–78) reminds us, external goods are not necessarily problematic for social practices like sports, the quest for high salaries, endorsements, profits, celebrity, and power has become so competitive that many owners, administrators, athletes, and coaches are willing to forsake their sporting practices in the pursuit of them. MacIntyre warns of just such a possibility in *After Virtue*, noting that:

Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practice in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for the common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. (p. 194)

As problematic as external goods can be, McNamee (19: pp. 73–78) cautions that they are not necessarily corrupting influences for sports as social practices or for their internal goods. He utilizes the work of John Kekes in critiquing MacIntyre's views on external goods in relation to sport. According to Kekes (12: p.192), external goods can provide intrinsic satisfaction to those who receive them, both as “public confirmations” of the achievement of excellence within the practice and as valued scarce goods that “confer privilege,” when they are earned and distributed justly. “What this implies for practices such as sport,” McNamee (19) infers, “is that the presence of external goods as rewards for achievement is not inherently bad except that their corrupt and distorted systems of distribution make them so” (p. 77).

McNamee believes that sporting communities need to seek an appropriate balance between internal and external goods. He contends that external goods do have their place in sport as earned rewards and public recognitions of excellence, but that, as MacIntyre argues, such goods should neither corrupt nor direct the practice that their institutions serve. In closing his thoughts on the proper balance between internal and external goods, McNamee notes that:

Because practices offer us the variety of goods sports do *and* a range of public recognitions for our relative excellence in them, in proper part and justly

conferred, we have all the more reason to value them. This will not be done by denying the place of external goods in those practices and in our lives but by ensuring their subordination to our prior commitments to the internal goods but by keeping them in their place (19: p. 78)

Now that we have a clear understanding of the elements of MacIntyrean social practice theory, we are in a better position to see how it aligns with the interpretivist view of sport. As previously demonstrated, MacIntyre appears to accept institutionalized sports as social practices, and thus implicitly recognizes them as the type of activities that get their purpose from and are defined by a set of specific internal goods through which excellence is to be attained. Similarly, interpretivists recognize sports as activities that are uniquely defined by the lusory logics, challenges, and means through which excellence in them is to be achieved. In addition, as shown above, Torres' constitutive skills are clear examples of MacIntyrean internal goods of sport; others might include lusory strategies, some restorative skills such as throw-ins in football and free throw shooting in basketball, and contesting excellences noted by R. Scott Kretchmar and Tim Elcombe (14: p. 189), including playing with a lead and coming from behind.

Another link between MacIntyrean theory and interpretivism is the belief that the internal goods of sport should be supported and carefully looked after. MacIntyre himself (18: p. 94) contends that the members of practice communities, such as those related to sports, should look to the internal goods of their practices to determine the virtues they must cultivate and demonstrate if they are to attain those internal goods. The actions, the virtues, and internal goods recommend in a given situation would thus come from the best interpretation of the specific practice and would presumably be actions taken with the best interests of that practice in mind (16: pp. 111–112).

Interpretivists also recommend that sporting communities act with the best interests of internal goods such as their constitutive skills and their sport's foundational gratuitous logic as guides. Principles such as the "Principles of Adjudication in Sport" developed by Russell (24: pp. 35–37) and the "Principles for a Just Evaluation System" presented by Torres and Hager (30: pp. 218–219), stand as examples of how interpretivist theories can offer the members of sporting communities general guidance in determining courses of action or recommending alterations to their formal structures or institutional frameworks, by utilizing those central internal goods that make them the unique activities they are. For instance, Russell's first principle of adjudication (24: p. 35), which states that "Rules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered," and Torres and Hager's principle stating that "Just evaluation systems should put a premium on goal achievement through constitutive skills" (30: p. 219) both clearly emphasize the primacy of the constitutive skills of sports as internal goods that are to be promoted and protected.

Finally, both the MacIntyrean and interpretivist views emphasize that the internal goods and standards of excellence of sports as social practices should not be subjugated to external goods or individual preferences. When institutions propose changes to sporting practices that sacrifice the primacy of internal goods such as the constitutive skills in favor of external goods such as financial gains or increases in popularity, MacIntyreans and interpretivists alike will argue against



such changes because they support neither the best interests of sports as social practices nor the best interpretations of them. Having thus established that MacIntyrean social practice theory aligns well with the interpretivist view of sport, we may now respond to Finn's arguments for the play-off system.<sup>2</sup>

## A Response to Finn's Case in Favor of the Play-Off System

As seen above, Finn's first line of defense for the play-off system is based upon the claim that the intentional goal of entertainment that inspires athletes, spectators, and officials legitimizes the choice of the play-off system. Thus, he argues that "While an accurate ranking is certainly one of the many goals of sport, it should not necessarily take priority over the intentional goals of athletes and fans" (p. 74). Not only does Finn believe that the implementation of a competitive scheme that maximizes the opportunity to accomplish the structural goal of sport is shortsighted, he also contends that the value of entertainment is internal to competitive sport. We believe that Finn's first line of defense for the play-off system is wanting in several respects.

Our initial argument against Finn's position relates to the status of intentional goals, specifically entertainment and enjoyment, and their relation to the structural goal of sport understood as a MacIntyrean social practice. As a social practice, each sport possesses a constitutive and defining set of internal goods of excellence. Paraphrasing MacIntyre, the internal goods of excellence provide each sport with its *telos*. When we enter into a particular sport, we necessarily enter into a kind of human activity in which the internal goods of excellence are of paramount importance and, therefore, provide guidance and inspiration to our actions and desires. This suggests that intentional goals are contingent to the *telos* of each specific sport. Whatever the specific intentional goals athletes, spectators, and officials seek to materialize when engaged in sports, they do so by partaking in a particular sport and its internal goods of excellence rather than another. In this sense, both internal and external intentional goals are bound to the internal goods of excellence of the sport. The latter do not *take* priority over the former, but *are* primary in a logical sense. So, athletes, spectators, and officials are expected to pursue not just crass entertainment, but the entertainment that only the submission and devotion to the internal goods of excellence can offer and provide. This kind of entertainment has its source in the quest for the internal goods of excellence and, thus, possesses a profound meaning rather than the sense of amusement or diversion typically associated with it.

McNamee has argued that sporting communities need to subordinate the external goods of sport to our primary commitment to the internal goods, otherwise their predominance distorts social practices by relegating their internal goods of excellence to a secondary role. This is clearly the case with external intentional goals such as fame, wealth, or prestige—what Finn calls external considerations to sport. The same logic, however, also applies to the internal intentional goals of athletes, spectators, and officials. They need to be subordinated to the internal goods of excellence if the social practice is to thrive.

Finn could say that his position is compatible with this view, since some internal intentional goals, such as "participating in an inherently enjoyable activity" or "striving for athletic excellence," are aligned with the structural goal of sport, all of which he calls internal considerations to sport (p. 72). While some

internal intentional goals seem to be aligned with the structural goal of sport and its internal goods of excellence, others, such as “improving one’s health” (p. 72), may not be so. Indeed, preoccupation with our health could minimize concerns for the structural goal of sport and its internal goods of excellence. Moreover, on occasion, some attempts to heighten the athletes’ and spectators’ experience of suspense, drama, and excitement, all internal intentional goals, have led to decisions that jeopardize or contradict both the structural goal of sport and its internal goods of excellence. One example is the implementation of tie breakers to force the decisions of winners and losers even in games that do not require such decisions. Many tie breakers not only neglect the efforts of the athletes during regulation play, they also require them to exercise skills that are peripheral to the sport as constituted to settle the score and determine a winner and a loser. The additional suspense, drama, and excitement are derived from a source that is detached from the core of the sport. Not surprisingly, tie breakers are common in competitive schemes that involve a play-off.

Our argument does not negate that intentional goals do have a place in competitive sport. It says that they are logically subjugated to the structural goal of sport and its internal goods of excellence. The interpretivist approach to sport as MacIntyrean social practices discussed in the previous section indicates that when we agree to participate in competitive sport, we necessarily agree to measure our ability to solve the problem inherent to the sport through the implementation of the relevant internal goods of excellence and compare it to that of our opponent. The intentional goals are not as logically strong as the necessity to fulfill the structural goal and the sport’s internal goods of excellence. Thus, in sport, intentional goals do not enjoy the privileged and autonomous status Finn assigns them; indeed, their proper role is as subsidiary. Privileging them sacrifices what characterizes competitive sport, which elicits the following question: “why choose competitive sport if the intention is to subvert it?” This is precisely what the play-off system does. It vitiates the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence to promote values such as drama, fun, and entertainment, which, as demonstrated previously, are logically dependent on the relevant internal goods of excellence in competitive sport. In a sense, competitors who choose intentional goals that are prone to facilitate this vitiation fail qua competitors.

It is also questionable whether the play-off system heightens some of the values Finn argues it does. The case of the Rugby Union is instructive in this regard. Rugby Union is a sport with an increasing global appeal. Teams can earn points by scoring either tries or goals. Whereas the first method of scoring carries 5 points, the second carries 3 points for penalty kicks and dropkicks, and 2 point for conversion kicks. Although teams have several ways at their disposal to earn points, Rugby Union practitioners agree that “scoring tries is the real joy of rugby” (33, p. 15). From an interpretivist point of view, it could be argued that try scoring is not only a most distinguishing feature of the sport, but also an element that the practice community seeks to emphasize and realize. Unsurprisingly, in its *Review of the Game 2003*, the International Rugby Board highlights that “If the desired objective of the game is to win through scoring tries and concede few penalties, then both 2003 and 2002 have been exceptional years” (10: p. 6). That was the case because during that period “points from tries exceeded points from penalty goals by over 50%” (10: p. 6). Similarly, in its analysis of the 2003 Rugby Union

World Cup, the International Rugby Board stresses that “81% of the matches were won by the team scoring the most tries” and that “proportionately more tries and fewer penalties were scored than in all World Cups but the first one” (11: p. 1). Evaluating the history of the Rugby Union World Cup after its 2007 edition, the International Rugby Board further remarks that of the 233 matches played in the tournament to date **“only 11 were won by the team that scored the fewest tries but kicked more penalties”** (9: p. 16).

The deemphasis of goal scoring and emphasis of try scoring by both Rugby Union officials and the whole practice community indicates that the game is at its best and flourishes when try scoring, along with the strategies conducive to its materialization, predominate. That is to say, Rugby Union’s connoisseurs find the game deeply entertaining, joyful, meaningful, and attractive when try scoring is sought and manifested. Yet, the competitive format implemented in the Rugby Union World Cup seems to deviate from this understanding of the game. While the initial stage of the tournament involves a round-robin in which all teams from each of the pools play each other, the final stage includes the first and second teams from each pool in a single-elimination format that decides the champion. As Rugby Union World Cups enter into their knockout phase, the relationship between try scoring and penalty-goal scoring changes dramatically in detriment of the former. For instance, “at the final stages [of the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup] however, penalties exceeded tries by 4 to 1” (11: p. 3) and no team scored more than one try in either the semifinals or the final. In the final of the 2007 edition of the tournament, no tries were scored at all (9: p. 1). The International Rugby Board seems to lament this situation, clarifying that “Nevertheless, in general, it is tries that win matches” (11: p. 11. See also 9: p. 15). All this suggests that the play-off system implemented in the final stages of the Rugby Union World Cups fosters less entertaining, attractive, and joyful games, as it manifestly takes away “the real joy of rugby.”

On the one hand, the case of Rugby Union suggests that the play-off system does not necessarily fulfill its promise of more entertaining, attractive, and joyful games. Indeed, it is the round-robin phase of the sport’s World Cup that appears to better foster the game’s internal goods of excellence. The Rugby Union’s practice community seems to find *more* entertaining, attractive, and joyful, games in which the defining core of the game is positively sought out and enacted. These connoisseurs deeply respect the social practice and favor entertainment, drama, and joy that not only are based on its internal goods of excellence, but that also advance the structural goal of competitive sport. It could be argued that they favor “constitutive or structural entertainment, drama, and joy.” The play-off system, and its alleged higher stakes, does not guarantee any of this and could possibly lead to conservative, speculative, and negative play in which constitutive skills are relegated to secondary status. In this sense, it also appears to promote an excessive concern for results and a lack of concern for the quality of performance. On the other hand, and related to the previous point, the case of Rugby Union also suggests that the play-off system sacrifices both the accurate measure and materialization of athletic excellence. Evidently, the knockout stage of the Rugby Union World Cup does not portray the game at its best. At least in this case, as implied by the game’s officials, there is a deleterious effect on its internal goods of excellence. The same can be said about the accomplishment of the structural goal of competitive sport.

Given these criticisms, we might question why it is that the play-off system is used so frequently. Without appealing to what Finn calls the cynical view (a view which he admits may be true in American sports [p. 70]), one possible answer is simply logistics. While this may be the case in some instances, such as the Olympic Games and different sports' international tournaments, it seems that there are numerous cases in which logistics hardly make the play-off system a necessity. Indeed, that seems to be the case with the most popular sports in the United States. Another example is the use of the play-off system in interscholastic, intramurals, or recreational sport. In many cases, time and other resources are available to utilize competitive formats other than the play-off system. The point which Finn does not explore is that sportspeople could have been simply socialized to prefer such a system, even though there might be competitive systems such as a season long championship, that are more fair, nuanced, and aligned with an interpretivist approach to sport as MacIntyrean social practices and that highlight both the internal goods of excellence and the structural goal of competitive sport. In contrast to the situation in American sport, practice communities around the world favor a season long tournament to a play-off.<sup>3</sup> Given the arguments expounded so far, the latter is to be preferred.

Finn portrays the structural goal of sport as one that provides us with a "thin" concept of sport, and argues that the intentional goals of athletes and spectators need to be accounted for more strongly in the institutional decision-making process because sport "offers so much more than raking competitors" (p. 72). There are two problems with Finn's claims. The first is that Finn misrepresents the structural goal of sport by overemphasizing the ranking aspect of it and underemphasizing the importance of accurately measuring and comparing athletic excellence. If rank is the only thing that matters, the focus of sport is outcome seeking rather than resolution seeking (31). Both outcome seekers and resolution seekers are seduced by the test delineated by its rules and internal goods of excellence. While the former are mainly attracted to the zero-sum qualities of competition and engage in a quest for favorable results regardless of athletic merit and quality of play, the latter are deeply concerned about the process of contesting and the role that excellence plays in making this process meaningful. This being so, the primary focus of the structural goal of sport should not be the mere raking of competitors, but the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence. It is clear that all wins are not created equal; some victories demonstrate greater levels of excellence than others. The play-off does not account for this. By contrast, the season long championship, by better accounting for the athletic excellence displayed throughout an entire season by the participants, promotes rakings that are not just more accurate but, more importantly, are fully meaningful. Undoubtedly, ranking competitors is not, from our perspective, the only thing that matters.

Second, contrary to Finn, we believe that dedication to the structural goal of determining athletic superiority through the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence provides a richer concept of sport; one that is more meaningful because it focuses on each sport's internal goods of excellence as a unique social practice. Institutions should foster the structural goal because it is the one goal in which each sport's meaning is grounded. Athletes and coaches should do the same. Whereas spectators are expected to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate athletic excellence, athletes are also expected to embody and expand it. This, of

course, cannot be accomplished without submitting to the internal goods of excellence of sport and its structural goal. This view of sport is richer because it provides the ground for the development of dispositions, skills, and accomplishments that, when blended together, make for meaningful and coherent living. We see the “more” that Finn believes is offered by sport as growing from the social practice itself and not from intentional goals. The commitment to and rewarding of athletic excellence trump general excitement and entertainment. An exciting or entertaining game is not necessarily an excellent one; although it could be.

Finn’s second line of defense for the play-off system proposes that when compared with the season long scheme, its copious offer of narrative potentialities can inspire “a more meaningful and richer experience” (p. 73). For him, the play-off system provides a better story, one that is richer and more meaningful than a season long scheme. While we agree that sport is a social practice that tends to be experienced as intrinsically valuable and that it exudes narrative potentialities for meaningful and connected living, we disagree on several accounts with Finn’s evaluation of the play-off system as a richer narrative source.

One of the problems with the play-off system is that it tends to undervalue, neglect, or flatly rejects what happens during the primary season. This is how athletes, coaches, and spectators seem to experience the play-off: everything starts anew. Whatever the qualitative character of the narratives that unfolded before this competitive stage, it is of little to no consequence as the play-off constitutes a whole new beginning. This detachment or disconnectedness hardly represents or is conducive to the kind of unitary experience Finn favors. The lack of unity between the play-off and the season that leads up to it is especially discernible when the defining internal goods of excellence of sport are taken into consideration. Feezell argues that the possibility for intrinsically valuable experiences “may be more available to those whose interest in and knowledge of the sport are keen” (7: p. 41). Interest and knowledge of sport necessarily refer to the internal goods of excellence and the structural goal of sport. It is problematic to argue and accept that the play-off system is superior to the season long format when it seeks a consummation that, by its very structure, jeopardizes what would otherwise be a most satisfactory completion: the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence. Rather than enriching the narrative possibilities offered by sport, the play-off system impoverishes them by, at best, diminishing or, at worst, denying the significance of the primary season and detracting from athletic excellence, in a way that prevents an integrated sport experience. Raising the stakes leads neither to a richer narrative structure nor to the sense of completion and satisfaction appreciated by connoisseurs of sport. In fact, it increases the chances that neither will most likely occur.

In this regard, Finn underestimates the importance of accurately rewarding the accomplishments of athletes and teams. Contra his example of the 2007 National Football League season and the 2008 Super Bowl, American professional sport narratives generally tell a story in which the season long champion who loses in the highly charged play-off is inferior to the winner. At least in the United States, few season long champions are remembered by the public, while play-off winners are typically exalted and generously rewarded by governing bodies and the public. In fact, sport narratives are frequently created around individuals and teams that win play-off tournaments, while the accomplishments of

season long champions are devalued by media outlets and representatives who create stories primarily consumed and remembered by the sporting public. These narratives, far from appreciating the nuances and complexities of the sport in question, seem to exude sensation, entertainment, immediateness, simplicity, and conciseness. Finn summarizes this well, explaining that the play-off system “heightens one’s interest in the outcome” (p. 74). The play-off system, by virtue of its structure, facilitates focusing mainly on outcomes. Given our discussion above, it should come as no surprise that we find narratives, both personal and public, that center around the quest for, measurement, and comparison of athletic excellence richer than those that exalt the zero-sum qualities of competition.

What follows from the previous point is that Finn also underestimates the richness that season long narratives can have in relation to play-off narratives, and, at the same time, overestimates the excitement play-off narratives bring without demonstrating why these stories are inherently more exciting than those provided by season long schemes. Again, in the United States, play-off narratives themselves seem to have become more or less homogenous. They are commonplace and less nuanced than the season long narratives of, for example, national football leagues in Europe and Latin America and, therefore, carry less excitement than Finn indicates they do. This has to do with the structure of the play-off system, and what it sets out to test and accomplish: to determine an outcome (to establish a winner and a loser) in a highly charged situation. Ironically, it could be argued that the play-off system only establishes a ranking between two contestants. That is the case because, in the name of entertainment, drama, and excitement which it does not guarantee either as observed in many play-offs in which the winner is decided early on, its sacrifices athletic excellence and the many meaningful values associated with its pursuit. As Feezell puts it in relation to baseball, to love the sport is to immerse ourselves “in a world . . . of admirable excellences” (7: p. 45). The season long system opens up possibilities for deeply meaningful experiences because they are forged in, around, and through these admirable excellences.

Part of Finn’s underestimation of the richness that season long narratives can have in relation to play-off narratives seem to reside in what the former competitive system offers and entails. Apparently, Finn believes that the season long tournament is simply an aggregation of discrete games each without much significance. He says that “With a season-long championship, many of the games have an equal value, the ‘best’ team may emerge long before the season ends” (p. 73). If value here takes a formalistic connotation, it is true that *all* games in a season long tournament, and not just *many*, are of equal value: the evaluation system rewards all games equally. However, if value has an experiential dimension that is clearly not the case. Teams have an unfolding story throughout the season and each game plays a role in the story. Each game serves as a terrain in which teams (re)discover their identity and is significant in this regard. That is, each game offers narrative possibilities and influences the evolving discursive pattern of all competitors. Standings represent this evolving discursive pattern and, thus, display the organic connection among the performance of all teams in all games at a given time in the season. The (re)configuration of the standings as a season advances precisely reflects athletic excellence, the unifying theme of competitive sport. The narratives facilitated by a season long tournament engage all participating teams in their

intricate interminglings as well as their individual stories, all embedded in a web of historical patterns and meanings.<sup>4</sup>

The season long scheme is a better story than the play-off, but its full appreciation requires sportspeople to pay close attention to a complex unfolding story that involves permutations among all teams involved. Rather than presenting a fragmentary story, the season long system makes for an intelligible totality centered on athletic excellence. Paraphrasing John Dewey, the season long tournament is no uniform uninterrupted series of games, but a competitive structure integrating a series of games, each having its own history, plot, and quality pervading it throughout. By placing a premium on the quest and celebration of the internal goods of excellence, the season long scheme provides us with an enriching and powerful story to make better sense of life. It goes beyond episodic exaltations of outcomes and reaches into our ability to develop a predisposition to understand, appreciate, and embrace the complexity, nuances, and potential of the season long scheme's internal organic unity as well as its meaning for coherent living.

## End of the Season

This paper is a critical response to Finn's case for the preferability of the play-off system as a method of organizing sport competition and, concomitantly, a defense of the season long system. Against "foes say[ing] that the season-long rotisserie total/record point style eliminates that 'any given Sunday' excitement that can come with a single-elimination play system" (28: p. 257–258), we argue that, when examined from an interpretivist account of sport as MacIntyrean social practices, the former is to be preferred to the latter. This account of competitive sport underlines both its internal goods of excellence and structural goal, thus, rendering intentional goals contingent to them. Pursuing, measuring, and comparing athletic excellence take precedence over the unqualified desire for a flick of Sunday excitement. In this regard, we believe that our defense of the season long system is based on a thick account of competitive sport, one that by fostering dedication to the structural goal of determining athletic superiority through the measurement and comparison of athletic excellence, provides the ground for meaningful and coherent living. The season long system opens up possibilities for deeply significant experiences and narratives, both personal and public, because they are precisely forged in, around, and through athletic excellence rather than a yearning for entertainment. As MacIntyre would say, pursuing excellence is a defining element of the good life and, at the same time, a source for unitary and manifestly satisfying human narratives.

## Notes

1. See for example Arnold (1), Schneider and Butcher (25), Butcher and Schneider (2), and Morgan (21; 22).
2. It has not escaped us that we are aligning two moral theories that appear to be in opposite camps. MacIntyre's theory of practical reasoning is generally regarded as an anti-realist moral theory, while interpretivist accounts of sport are presented in the sport philosophy literature as realist moral accounts. Space does not allow us to weigh in on the realist/anti-realist debate here, but we believe that, given MacIntyre's apparent acceptance of organized sports as social

practices and the relationship we have demonstrated between key internal goods of sports (i.e., their constitutive skills) and their specific types of gratuitous logic and constitutive challenges, it is reasonable to align these views in spite of their meta-ethical differences. Indeed, MacIntyre seems to allow sufficient distance between the internal goods of sport and what sporting communities think these goods are. In doing so, he apparently leaves room for external criticism of a sporting community's decisions about its sport and aligns his position with that of interpretivists.

3. English football has three yearly tournaments: the Premier League, which follows a season long format, and the Football Association Challenge Cup and the Football League Cup, both of which follow a knockout format. However, it is the winner of the Premier League that is widely regarded as the most accomplished and preeminent team in English football. Similar situations are found in different European football and other sports leagues.

4. In addition to these arguments, the organizational structure of many European and South American football leagues (and many other sports around the world) further demonstrate that games in a season-long championship do not have equal value. The systems of promotion and relegation and qualification for supranational competitions in these leagues provide great incentives for teams to be competitive throughout the entire season, even if they lose all chances to win the championship at a given point of the season and/or if the "best" team emerges before the end of the season. These incentives clearly provide different value and significance to games. In the case of the Argentine football league, relegation is decided based on the average of the last three seasons. It is important to note that professional sport leagues in the United States and Canada are notable exceptions to the promotion and relegation system. See (6).

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