Records and the Man

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RECORDS AND THE MAN*

by
Paul Weiss

Athletic records often have an attractive mathematical precision. They then allow one to measure with some accuracy just what is occurring. This can be compared with what had been done previously, and both can be compared with similarly recorded achievements of others, near and far, present and past.

Athletic records purport to report what was accomplished. Often they signalize some outstanding occurrence, what is worth noting. Since men are most likely to extend themselves to the limit in extreme situations, the records frequently reflect the fact that the results have been achieved in crises or as the outcome of some crucial testing. Records of this desirable nature are most readily obtainable in those events where individual is pitted against individual, providing there is some agreement on how to determine what times and distances are involved, or a commonly accepted way of quantifying style—as is done in diving and gymnastics—and accuracy, as in fly casting and shooting.

Some records tell us mainly what one man achieved in comparison with others. This is the case with the shot put, pole vault, diving, running, swimming, golf. Other records tell how an individual stands in relation to a special group of competitors—those of the same sex, of such and such a weight or age, who have passed qualifying rounds or preliminary heats, and the like. Some records tell us about the achievements of individuals, but only within the frame of a team activity. Individual members of relay teams can be timed. The performance of every player in baseball is distinguished from every other; every play is accredited to some player. Here mistakes, errors, and failures, as well as successes and assists are noted, to be added up to make a profile of a career.

The more extensive the records are, the more ready are we to accept them as objective summaries of what a man not only has done, but what he can do, and therefore what he truly is. But we then go much beyond where we should.

Similar programs are carried out to some extent in football, soccer, rugby, basketball, and tennis doubles. Though the final result is credited to a team, some of the things that some of the individuals do are also recorded. In these and in the other cases, clear, objective, useful, and pertinent material is sought, which will enable one to compare a number of athletes. This effort is carried out alongside or within a larger attempt to determine just what the team accomplished.

The ultimate object of all athletic records is to set down the best results that men have brought about, severally and together, in public matches under well-established conditions, governed by rules and competent judges. Ideally, one thereby learns what is the most men have been able so far to achieve through the agency of matured, trained bodies. The records in which we are most inter-

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...told us the limits beyond which no one has yet been able to go.

Records of individuals, even in well-judged contests, are not always obtainable. It is obviously hard to separate out the contributions of the members of a crew, of a tug of war, or perhaps even of a mountain climb. The most meticulous, detailed account of a baseball game fails to attend to all the helpful and hindering contributions of the individual players. The signals of the catcher, the move toward third by the shortstop, the jeer of a spectator, the demands of the coaches, racial slurs and a hundred other matters, making a difference to the motivation and effectiveness of a player, are not part of the record. The most complete account that we can obtain tells us much less than we want to know even about performances in contests where individuals compete against one another, or only against some established time or record.

Records are cherished because of their assumed impersonality, impartiality, exactitude, and objectivity. But they are achieved in situations which are qualified by—and therefore compromised by—the temper and judgment of officials, the alertness of umpires at vital junctures, the prejudices and interpretations of those who decide and record. Watches, scales, and rulers are not absolutely accurate; they are affected by changes in climate and by wear and tear. If a number of them are used they will be found to be in some discord.

All records abstract from the nature of the track or field. They ignore the dullness or brightness, indoors or out; wind below a certain arbitrary velocity is neglected, yet its benefit when at the back and its hindrance when in the front can make a difference in the times of two equally speedy men, racing at different times. Advantages, if any, offered by playing on home grounds, by having the backing of enthusiastic supporters, by the number of spectators, though remarked upon by an occasional reporter, do not appear in the records.

At their best, records provide only partial evidence of what was done. Since they inevitably bundle together what the individual does and what circumstances, team mates, coaches, and opponents contribute to the final result, records can tell us only what men did in a number of incompletely described and inadequately understood situations. They report the accomplishments of outstanding contextualized individuals, and then only in certain sports, and in abstraction from various conditions which in fact made a difference to the result. Though still not entirely satisfactory, the records we have on race horses are superior in detail and perhaps in precision to those we have on men. The state of the track, the nature of the weather, previous performances, handicaps, the way they start off and the way they come to the end, and the times for parts of the entire distance are all noted. But even here we have only an abstract of what had been done, and far too little to tell us what in fact happened, and of course what will next occur.

The records we have yield only hints and rough indications of what might reasonably be expected of a player at some subsequent time. They can provide little help for one who would like to decide between those who have somewhat the same skills, experience, and reputations. Their different records could be due to any one of a number of unnoticed and unnoted factors.

Because the knowledge that records provide is necessarily inadequate, one
must turn to reporters, coaches, and scouts to learn what in fact occurred, what was achieved by individual players, and what one might expect from them in other situations. These observers give weight to items not mentioned in the records, even though they contribute significantly to the final result. The weighing of these factors, the determination of their importance, role, and relevance is largely an individual matter. The assessments are subject to no controls, nor are they protected against caprice, prejudice, or poor judgment. Too much is unspecified and unquantified, and not subject to review. A more exact, objective procedure is desirable, and surely is possible. It is not enough, as is sometimes done today, to provide scouts with guidelines, or a list of abilities which are scaled in importance in relation to one another. More attention should be paid to the speed of reflexes, to the kinds of experiences the men have had, the kind of coaching that has been received, the occasions on which one is making the observations, and above all to just what is being quantified and what is not, and why.

The reports of experienced observers, despite their inevitable limitations and faults, are invaluable. They provide irreplaceable means for enabling one to go beyond the records toward the man. Though the vagueness, arbitrariness, and subjectivity which spoils the accounts of seasoned students of sport cannot be altogether eliminated, their excesses are usually avoided because the judges know that they themselves will be judged. Their recommendations are noted and matched against the results attained by the athletes they endorse as well as those attained by the ones they reject. Every coach and scout has sometimes celebrated an athlete who fails dismally thereafter, and every once in a while the shrewdest of judges passes over one who later becomes outstanding.

The limitations which spoil the value of the records of individuals and teams operate, of course, to make the records we have of the reports and predictions of coaches and scouts not as reliable indices of their judgments as owners, administrators and the public take them to be. Since those who are involved in sport and sport predictions are practical men, they rightly stop the regress at this point. They do not ask who is to assess the reports of the assessors, and on what basis. They are willing to accept as a sufficient testimony of excellence in judgment any record which shows a preponderance of endorsements of athletes who subsequently proved to be champions. But this, of course, is to leave the entire process in the intellectual limbo of mystery, hidden behind presumed ‘hunches,’ ‘insight,’ ‘perceptiveness,’ or ‘genius.’

II

There are aspects to every athletic performance which are forever beyond the reach of any recording, because they take place in situations which a. are concrete, b. are subject to contingencies, c. involve novelties, d. are affected by luck, e. are beset by obstacles, and f. are benefitted by opportunities.

a. A performance is a unique event, never to be repeated. It occurs just there and at just that time, inside a distinctive situation where it occupies an irreplaceable position. That is why one must go to an athletic event to know what occurs. Newspaper accounts provide only static generalizations and summaries
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of what in fact takes place. Movies and television, to be sure, let us see some of the action. But they necessarily provide only an abstract of the whole. Pauses, hesitations, preparations, rests, repetitions are ignored for the sake of dramatization. Even if they allowed us— as they now do not— always to take in the entire situation with its spectators, field, climate, and sky, they would, because of their need to attend to the dramatic, neglect, distort, and reorder what actually occurs. Athletic events are often dramatic, but they are only episodically so. The highs occur unexpectedly in the midst of a multitude of flat moments. But even if the whole were reproduced, it would fall short of what a spectator saw, if for no other reason than that the spectator affects and is affected by his neighbors, and these in turn affect and are affected by the players.

Predictions, like records, are abstract, general, confined to outlines, structures, forms. Every element in every situation is necessarily unpredictable in its full concreteness. Just as records fail and must fail to report what concretely occurs, so predictions fail and must fail to tell us what will actually occur, in all its concreteness.

b. Every element in a situation could conceivably have been different. Its presence there is contingent; something else could have happened instead. Even in a world ruled by necessitating causes, exhibiting implacable laws, there would be contingencies. Not only would there be intersections of different causal lines that need not have been, but there would be a working out of each causal line in only one of many alternative ways.

The particularity, the details of every occurrence are beyond all prediction, and outside the control of causes or laws. The fact is not remarked in our records. One reason is that it would complicate them unduly. But there is also the tacit supposition that the contingencies which lean in one direction will eventually be matched by others leaning in an opposite, thereby making unnecessary a remarking of either set. But there is nothing in fact or theory which shows that such matching must occur. An athlete who is persistently superior to others may be one who frequently but contingently is in accord with whatever contingencies there are.

c. In and of itself, every item is novel, no matter how similar it may be to that which had once or often occurred. That type of thing might reappear with tedious frequency, but in itself the item would be unpredictable. One might predict when it would take place and the kind of occurrence it was and perhaps even the natures of its effects. The prediction would refer, though, to what was summarizable, generalizable, repeatable, not to it as just that new occurrence.

Every athletic event has its element of novelty. The running of a race, the catch of a ball, the execution of a swing have structures which are filled out in novel ways. No matter how commonplace or familiar it seems, it is new. It could have been necessitated; it surely is contingent; it is inseparable from the concrete. But novelty is present too in a thinking, with its abstractions and ideas.

d. A chance occurrence is one that takes place spontaneously, undetermined by law or will. It is not identifiable with the concrete, for though this is beyond
control of law and will, it could conceivably have nothing spontaneous in it. It is also distinct from the contingent or novel, since these could be the outcome of the working out of previous conditions, whereas it is fresh, conditioned perhaps but never caused.

Chance events can be part of a series whose mathematical patterns can be stated with precision. The run of the cards, the roll of the dice do not provide ideal illustrations of such mathematically calculable distributions, since the different occurrences are far from random and are not necessarily of equal value. They are not even independent, due to the operation of human habits, the absence of perfect randomness in the operation of mechanical devices, and the presence of contingencies. Most important, the statistical results that are mathematically obtained need not be realized in any finite run—which is, of course, all that one can have in this world. Given a particular situation it is a matter of uncalculatable chance that it should occur just then.

In sport, chance refers to unpredictables which make a difference to the result. Luck is a special case. It refers to those chance events which make a significant difference to the likelihood of victory. Most often, luck adds a personal note to a supposed objective chance, and is called ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on whether or not one’s success is promoted.

Chance and luck occur inside a game. But they can also intrude into a game. It is a matter of chance or luck that a needed wind suddenly comes up, that a dog runs in the way of a kick, that a spectator interferes with a swing. There may be nothing distinctively contingent or novel in these occurrences—they might have well understood causes. But they are chance occurrences in the game, entering it inexplicably in such a way as to change the outcome.

Favorable streaks of luck we think will eventually be balanced by unfavorable ones. But, once again, there is no reason for supposing this to be a true account of the course of the world. Appeals to laws of chance, to bell shaped curves and the like relate to simple units in mathematical frames where they occur at random over an indefinite period. They are not pertinent to sport where we have complex human beings in concrete limited situations, confined by the rules of the game, and occupied with what occurs within short spans of space and time.

e. Where luck refers to what itself makes a difference, and the contingent refers to anything that could have been other than it is, obstacles refer to what demands that more than the usual effort be made to attain the usual result. One can credit to contingency or luck the obstacles that are produced by the responses of opponents, by the baffling juncture of a number of circumstances, by blunders and accidents. It makes little sense to say that one is unlucky to have a run of bad luck, but it makes good sense to say that one is unlucky to have to deal with such and such an obstacle. It makes little sense to say that it is contingent that there is contingency, or that it is novel that there is novelty, but it makes good sense to say that obstacles are among the contingencies, or that they are novel not only in their concreteness, but even in their kind.

f. An opportunity is an occasion in which appropriate action will increase the
likelihood of success. It is not the simple negative of an obstacle. Obstacles in fact might provide opportunities for moves which one might otherwise not make, or which opponents might not expect. Lack of opportunity is not the same as facing an obstacle. A normal development provides neither undue opportunities or obstacles. Nor is overcoming an obstacle the same as producing an opportunity; it may merely bring one back to the normal position. Opportunities are unexpected openings; they may or may not be predictable, necessitated, or familiar. But, like obstacles, they are usually not noted in the records, despite the great role they sometimes play in the determination of an important result.

Concreteness, contingency, novelty, luck, obstacles, and opportunities all make a difference to what is achieved. Since records abstract from these, they tell us not what in fact did occur, but the outcome of a multitude of factors of which we take little or no note. When we credit the result to an athlete or a team, we isolate a fragment of a very complex, detailed, and unrepeatable whole.

III

The tendency today seems to be toward showing that intelligence is grounded in inheritance, despite the fact that early deprivation and pressing needs may prevent, hobble, or distort the exercise and proper use of the mind. There are those who would attribute crime to circumstance, though many a criminal act is willed and has its roots in attitudes and values which would make the crime reasonable or desirable. But there is little consensus as to just to whom or where one should credit the achievements in sport. The question, we have seen, gets little help from records. The records have no bearing on the question as to whether or not the athlete’s actions are outcroppings of an inherited ability or disposition, are the fruits of training, or express something distinctive about a man as private, free, and self-determining. They not only abstract from the concreteness, the contingencies, the novelties, the luck, the obstacles, and the opportunities characteristic of a situation in which a record is set, but they abstract from the individual men, with their distinctive commitments, judgments, freedom, and dedications.

An athlete seeks to make maximal use of a trained body to attain an outstanding result in particular situations. He who does not try to make maximal use of his body is playing at and not in a sport. If his body is not trained, his mind, interests, and volition will not appreciably further his athletic activities, and he will, of course, lack the skills and readiness required by one who is to function as an athlete.

A man may exercise, enjoy himself and even engage in some sport for pleasure or relaxation. He will then not fully participate in the activity but will be idling to some degree. And if he does not make an outstanding effort in particular situations, usually publicly watched and judged, he will remain in a state of preparation, not yet engaged, even though he may be treated as a participant by himself and by others.

An athlete makes use of inherited bodily traits, an established cast of mind,
and well-intrenched physical and mental dispositions. His upbringing and his experience make a difference. All are brought to bear on an end which he persistently seeks to realize. There is satisfaction for the athlete in a task well done here and now. He is satisfied because it embodies his end. If it did not it would be, at best, a detached grand stand play. His past gives him material to work upon: he makes best use of it if, while performing at his best, he also promotes the end to the maximum degree that the situation permits.

IV

The athlete is more than a place where past and future meet. He determines the nature of that union. It is his task to bring about the best possible unification of a worthwhile past and a desirable end. This is done, not by simply allowing the end to control the act that his past now makes possible, but by so acting that a maximal result is attained. Did he not do this, his acts would be merely agencies for eventually attaining some remote objective. He would get no satisfaction now, he would achieve nothing today, but would instead merely be on his way, coming nearer perhaps but never arriving at the desirable goal.

That end is at once most desirable and efficacious which, when attached to an act, turns other occurrences into sufficient conditions for the repetition of that act. (Some such idea as this is at the root of Skinner's behaviorism. He attaches rewards to the particular moves which he wants to have repeated. The product of reward and movement then serves as a prospect that an organism acts to realize from the position of an antecedent. "Reinforcement," on his view, makes the antecedent a sufficient condition for the production of the result.)

An end to which a man is dedicated should be united by him to less remote, more limited prospects. The result will be an objective which he can seek to realize from any one of an indefinite number of positions. If he has dedicated himself properly, he will then be satisfied every moment on the way to a complete fulfillment. The end to which an athlete is dedicated is narrower than that appropriate to man at his best. It is an end which demands for its realization the use and preservation of an excellent body. To accept such an end is to be occupied with the realization of goals in which the body is used excellently.

It is not too difficult to entertain a worthwhile end. From childhood on men are led to envisage ideal states of affairs. They see themselves to be central figures, enriched by and ennobling whatever environs them in an idealized world. Readily they imagine themselves idealized there. But it is not easy to hold on to such an end in sadness and in joy, in success and in failure, unless one had previously fully identified oneself with the idealized figure one had projected into the idealized world.

Each man idealizes himself. He also makes himself anew at every moment. We would like to know, particularly if we are engaged in putting together a successful team with a minimum waste of time and money, just which men will make themselves maximally, especially when subject to severe tests against others well-skilled. We cannot, of course, get to the center of anyone's privacy; we cannot tell in advance just what a man will make himself be at a given moment. But we can tell in advance what will be done by a man properly dedi-
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cated: he will do the best that he can possibly do then. He will charge the union of past and future with spontaneity, imagination, judgment, and a sense of what the responses of others might be. But though what he does then, neither he nor anyone else can fully know in advance, their nature and import can be anticipated on the basis of past performance.

Men are free, but they exercise their freedom more or less the way in which they had exercised it before. The most complete knowledge of their past, though it goes far beyond what any record can exhibit, falls short of telling us what men can or will do. It is necessary to know also whether or not they are dedicated. This can be surmised on the basis of what they do in other situations outside the game, in training sessions, in warm-ups, in the locker room, and far outside the arena of sport. If they move toward the self-same end in a multitude of diverse circumstances, some of which are trying and difficult, we have good grounds for supposing that they are dedicated, and therefore will come as close as conditions permit to doing what should be done.

The athlete chooses that fulfillment which requires and is affected by a perfected and operative body. He envisages himself in that body, with his basic needs and desires met. Usually his vision of this is dim; he may not know how to express it or to analyze it. But this need not affect what he does, for the efficacy of his dedicated end depends not on its details but on the value it promises, and the lure this provides.

Some men are able to perform in games better than most and yet do not seem to be dedicated at all. They are casual, irresponsible; they do not train or get ready. And there are men who seem to be dedicated but who are unable to become truly great. We sometimes speak of the one as ‘gifted’ or as a ‘genius,’ and say that the other has ‘insufficient courage’ or ‘lacks sense,’ or ‘has a failure of nerve.’ But these are only devices for marking out exceptions from the general rule. By and large, those perform excellently who are not only well prepared but who persistently seek to be completed through the splendid use of their bodies in situations which test them to the limit.

Scientists, musicians, religious, and ethical men are also dedicated to the attainment of complete, fulfilled lives. They differ from the athlete in at least three ways. They do not seek, either now or later, to be fulfilled primarily by having an excellent body deployed excellently in severe, public tests, objectively judged. They have a somewhat clearer understanding than the athlete does of the nature of the end they seek to realize, and the import of the sacrifices that must be made to bring it about. Most important, the end that they envisage, though never freed from a reference to the self, is one in which their own completion is inseparable from the completion of others. When an athlete makes provision for the success of his team mates, it is usually because this is incidental to his own. If he puts team always above himself he may become popular, and be known as a prince among men; but he often will fail to become the athlete he could have been. The excellence sought by the other types of dedicated men, though not without its element of self-regard and self-seeking, is broad enough to be realized by many independently, in such a way as to still allow them to be harmoniously together.
The athletic goal rarely allows a man to work toward the achievement of anyone but himself, except incidentally and as a means. It provides a needed counterbalance to the radical idealism of youth with its willingness to sacrifice, and its devotion to what is noble and great. The young man is willing to punish himself, to subject himself to strain and pain because it is seen to be but a pre-payment for the pleasure and glory, the satisfaction and completion that is part of the end which he has made his own.

Though, as we have seen, records are not credited only to the athlete, he deserves that credit more than his teachers or the circumstances do. Though they contributed, it was he who at crucial times served his dedicated end by giving it a maximum embodiment. It was he who made this time at bat, this tackle, this hurdle, this dive, this pass, be a unit act in a series of achievements all governed by the same demands and all promoting the same result.

Records tell us something about what a man has done. They do not tell us what he is. To know what he is, we must know what he would be. And to know this we must know what he now does. This requires the sifting out of the contributions made by his past, circumstance, contingency, chance, etc., and above all, by the end of being a man who is perfected by making excellent use of a perfected body, particularly in competition with others similarly dedicated and prepared.