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ARTICLE

Heidegger on the Sports Field: Resisting Neoliberalism and Why It Matters

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ABSTRACT

As human life is fundamentally communal life, finding ways of living well together is vital for all people to flourish. How a form of life interprets, understands and communicates their world must convey life-affirming ways of being. A people's stories, songs, sculptures, paintings, carvings, dance, drama and sports are repositories of learning which serve to express ideas and values that constitute our human way of being. At their best, the messages they transmit help to guide enriching relationships between people and uphold ways of living that are fitting and sustainable. Many of these practices also show what happens when we don't do a good job of it. Drawing on the work of Heidegger to situate the discussion within our fundamentally embodied, embedded, and interrelated human condition, this paper focuses on sport as one form of intergenerational communal expression. The paper maintains that sport at its best conveys norms and codes of conduct through which participants come to embody the social competencies required for responsive and responsible interaction. However, a tension exists between sport as a guiding communal practice that can enhance human flourishing, and sport shaped by a pervasive neo-liberal ideology. Showing how neo-liberalism's emphasis on hyper-individualistic, market-driven, profit-oriented practices has unhinged sport from its vital role in shaping responsive and responsible people, the paper goes on to identify practices at the margins which can be engaged in the struggle to overcome the pernicious effects of neo-liberalism, enabling sport to do the human work it is capable of.

Keywords: Sport; Values; Embodied Understanding; Identity; Human Flourishing; Neo-Liberal Ideology

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1. Introduction: Situating the Discussion

Human life is communal life. We are obviously dependent on one another for our very survival when young, and because no-one has all the skills to go it alone, we continually require others for our mutual well-being. However, in our human world, communal life is more than this: it is fundamental for making sense of ourselves and the things we do. For example, a person cannot understand themselves as a teacher unless this role exists within a framework of shared, normative understanding—a horizon of intelligibility[1]—in which there are students, buildings called schools, and the language and shared concepts that underpin and communicate what education requires. If they are to work well in this role and implement what the role requires, they must be guided and shaped over time within accepted and acceptable norms, by others who have been there before. Through guided practice, we learn to go on in the same way without supervision and correction. As both Heidegger and Wittgenstein have shown, going on in the same way is not imitation, but adept appropriation of a practice—it is embodied skillful living[1,2].

Through our engaged, practical involvements in the world, we come to embody the necessary skills, attitudes and values required to enact a role well[3–5]. Our values are socially embedded orientations that inform our thinking, guide our judgment, motivate our actions and shape our institutional practices. Our embodied understanding is pre-reflective and embedded in a world of significance, so that we come to understand a situation not through an intellectual process, but through on-going, immersed, responsive interaction, where things matter in a certain way not just to me or you, but to us[1–5]. Our human way of being is to be a particular kind of being: one who has to interpret and make sense of themselves and their world[1]. The human condition is such that to be a physical entity is at the same time to be a cultural entity, so that human activities in a community of others are meaningful communicative acts through which a people establish, sustain and understand their existence and ground their values.

Learning to participate in the world with others is also an on-going dialectical relationship in which people are shaped by and subsequently shape one another and the institutions and practices they are part of. Our understanding of who we are and what our life is about is continually enacted and fundamentally related to the voices of others within this shared normative framework, which sustains commitments, obligations and responsibilities[1]. Through our on-going embodied participation in the world, our identity as a unique individual, who is somebody, somewhere, arises[4]. Our identity is dynamic and never complete, because we never cease to participate in and shape the flow of everyday life with our fellow beings.

Consequently, human life is inherently ethical life: the form that our relationships and interactions take, which constitute and uphold who we are and what we can do, are expressions of what we hold to be significant and valuable as a coherent community. This means that ethical questions are also questions of identity: when we consider what we should do, we are also considering who we are and hence, what kind of people we will become. If our communal life is to be sustainable, it must enable all its members to flourish in roles that have meaning and value. This means that ethical (and identity) questions arise when we are faced with situations that are seen as being detrimental to some, or marginalizing of others, or in situations where someone is riding roughshod over others in pursuit of selfish desires. For creatures such as ourselves who can raise such ethical (and identity) questions, it opens up the possibility of change. This means that ways of life can be challenged and different ways of doing things can be considered when a particular way of life is shown to be harmful or unsustainable[6].

Recognizing that the form of life in which we communally engage—the things we do and how we do them—is shaped over time and communicated through salient others, requires us also to think about the role that language plays in shaping the world and who we become. Learning to participate in the world with others is articulated and transmitted inter-generationally through language, understood broadly as a means of communication. We communicate through the words and concepts that we use, which, as Wittgenstein reminds us, are not a neutral means of communication, as they reveal a particular way of thinking, acting and living[2]. We also communicate to one another through our actions, facial expressions, our dispositions, posture, and the way that we use tone, pitch, and silence to deliver our message. These also reveal a particular way of thinking, acting and

living. If we are fortunate, the language that embeds us in our shared world cognitively integrates us into a world that is life-affirming and upholds the well-being of all[7–9].

Our human existence is such that we are always thrown into a world not of our own making[1]. Living in our current epoch in a Westernized country, the world in which we have been thrown is structured by abstract neo-liberal political and economic theories, which have real-world impacts on people's lives. Neo-liberal interpretations and understandings have shaped ideas, values, institutions and practices, imposing a way of thinking, speaking and living that has become woven into and deeply embedded in our life-world, configuring perceptions, the form that interactions take, and defining what is possible. In this way, neo-liberalism has become hegemonic. That is, it maintains its hold over people by weaving the very fabric of everyday life, so that it appears legitimate and inevitable[10]. Therefore, it is not possible to unravel individual psychology (how/why we think and interact as we do) and collective psychology from the socio-political-economic structures that people are enmeshed within. We must seek to understand the whole of which something/someone is a part.

Given the hegemony of neo-liberalism, it is the focus of this paper to lay out and critique this ideology and how it has undermined the integrity of sport for guiding fitting and sustainable human interactions. This paper also recognizes that there are people who have been pushed to the margins by this ideology who continually work to resist and challenge its hold. Exploring those margins, this paper offers suggestions for a way forward that may enable sport to do the work it is capable of.

It has been argued that other frameworks of thinking, for example, a Marxist–Leninist approach to sport, have also co-opted sport for ideological purposes. However, this is countered by others who propose that "the inability or unwillingness to consider what revolutionaries and socialist states thought and tried to do concerning sport, leisure, and physical activity only demonstrates Western chauvinism, not the limitations of Marx or Marxism–Leninism"[11]. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into this discussion, as "the work of fully reclaiming and learning from historical and present-day projects of socialist countries has yet to be done"[11].

It could also be argued that the "Sport for Development" (SfD) perspective aligns with the emphasis this paper is putting on the role of sport in upholding human well-being. However, there are some marked differences. Firstly, SfD uses sport as a vehicle for other goals, such as promoting gender equity or social inclusion[12]. Although these goals are important to achieve, it is not the intention of this paper to argue for a specific social goal. The focus is on the way that sport at its best can inculcate values that inform our whole way of being in the world with others. Secondly, some SfD programmes use sport as an attractant to get groups of young people to attend an event that is first and foremost concerned with programmes of training and education in other health-related fields[12]. Again, this is not the path for sport that this paper is arguing for. It has also been claimed that various iterations of SfD have always included the word 'development', a term that has been "criticized for decades for its simplicity, Eurocentrism, and assumption that individuals and groups of people should pursue a linear progression towards a Global North model"[13]. Based on this western idea of 'development', many SfD initiatives serve to uphold and reproduce established problematic economic, social, and political structures[13]. In this respect, this paper would find SfD programmes problematic. Whitley proposes that rather than coming up with a range of topics that somehow involve sport, we should "embrace sport on its own terms"[14] and shift the focus from what something *is* to what something does. The question that we should then be asking is "How can sport foster personal well-being and collective flourishing?"[14]. This is the question that this paper seeks to address, by revealing how the values that are inherent in sporting practices at their best are fundamental for living well together. To enable sport to do the work it is capable of this paper argues that it must be extracted from the jaws of neo-liberalism.

This paper shares similarities with Räikkönen and Hedman's position that aims "to raise awareness of the existential power of sports"[15]. They acknowledge sport as being "inherently a communal practice and a shared performance" that provides "opportunities for building identity and character, and a heightened sense of belonging, community, and purpose"[15]. This paper also concurs with Räikkönen and Hedman's claim that sport carries "the potential to bring meaning to people's individual and collective lives, and might teach us important lessons about what it means to be human"[15]. What this paper adds is an unpacking of the way in which

sport achieves these things through the values that are embedded within and embodied through sports practices. This paper also highlights how these values are fundamental for shaping a life-world in which all can flourish. Thus, through sport at its best, people become "producers of their own and their community's well-being, rather than mere recipients of pre-designed programmes"[15].

This paper also sits comfortably with the positions held by writers upholding a virtue ethics approach to sports. Acar collates themes derived from virtue ethics and sports literature to show that "sports are not merely physical activities but also platforms that foster individuals' ethical, intellectual, and existential development"[16]. He also notes that sports participation "can enhance both individuality and social responsibility"[16]. Whilst agreeing with many of the claims made by those who hold a virtue ethics approach to sport, this paper also acknowledges that sport is not played in an historical vacuum, highlighting the forces that undermine the cultivation of appropriate virtues in our current socio-economic-political context. When sport is undermined by forces shaped by neo-liberal interpretations and understandings of the world, it becomes harder for those involved to embody life-affirming values. Without such values, people lack the guidance to make appropriate decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas such as the use of performance-enhancing drugs, disputes over referee decisions, and experiences of existential harm in highly competitive environments. Although these issues are discussed in the virtue ethics literature, this paper adds a critique of the current socio-economic-political forces that make such issues possible and considers how to challenge them. It also makes explicit our fundamental embodied and embedded human existence, which is the ground for value formation.

Olympic Values Education is also concerned with inculcating values in young people through sport. Traditionally, the values promoted are 'excellence, respect and friendship'. These are said to be "universal principles applicable to everyday life"[17]. More recently, it has been argued that Olympic Values Education should link with broader social issues such as "peace, social inclusion, gender equality, and environmental protection"[17]. It has been pointed out that Olympic Values Education Programmes are often "fragmented and implemented on a short-term basis around the Olympic Games"[17], which limits their ability to inculcate desired values, so that values become mere slogans associated with an event[17]. Thus, it is argued that "their consistent and meaningful application in practice is not always guaranteed" and there is a gap between the rhetoric of Olympic Education and what it can actually achieve[17]. Although it is recognised that we can "foster a better world through sport"[17], questions arise as to the extent that this will happen given our current context of "commercialisation, political interests and social inequality"[17]. This paper agrees with Theodorakis et al. that there are tensions between what sports can aspire to and the realities of contemporary sport[17]. Importantly, Olympic Values Education often takes place in an abstract way, through discussion and other classroom-based teaching practices. This removes it from the existential feel and embodied involvement with sports practices at their best that this paper contends is central for inculcating the values necessary for human flourishing.

The ideas discussed in this paper are also endorsed by communitarian ethics in sport. Both hold that, at its best, sport is underpinned by values integral to human well-being. Communitarian ethics balances community well-being and individual well-being, seeking to ensure that access to and participation in sport are equitable. This paper holds that our human condition is inextricably entangled in the world with others, so that the well-being of individuals and communities is completely enmeshed. Trust, cooperation and upholding the integrity of sport are fundamental to both communitarian ethics and the position of this paper. The importance of sport for nurturing community, through participation, spectating and coaching/refereeing, which this paper endorses, is also emphasised by communitarian ethics. The impact of neo-liberal values on sport, a key issue of this paper, is also an issue for communitarian sports ethics. Whilst the latter position understands sport as a practice that is fundamental to community well-being, neo-liberalism takes sport to be just another commodity that can be used to generate a profit, undermining the work that this paper argues is fundamental to sport at its best. High performance training of elite athletes can be highly problematic under neo-liberal ideology, with its emphasis on commodifying the athlete to make a profit on any investment that has gone into individualised training programmes. Under such pressure, the temptation to do-whatever-it-takes in order to win can lead to deleterious outcomes for the athlete. A study of South Korean athletes by

Chang et al. shows how a communitarian position can foster communal cohesion in a high-performance training environment, in which athletes support one another and protect each other's well-being[18]. This is something this paper argues is significant for resisting the commodification of sport and the hyper-individualism of neo-liberalism, which leaves athletes alone and unsafe. Again, this paper adds to communitarian sports ethics an understanding of the centrality of our embodied involvement with sports practices for inculcating the values necessary for human flourishing.

It is not my intention in this paper to engage with the major internalist theories of sport, such as formalism, conventionalism and interpretivism[19]. All these approaches seek to nail down the essence of what makes something a sport. In Heideggerian terms, they are concerned with ontic inquiry[1]. In contrast, I take the stance that human understanding is embodied, embedded and engaged within worldly practices through which things become intelligible to us. It is an ontological process through which meaning arises within and through a horizon of intelligibility that constitutes our form of life[1]. That is, in our historically informed, complex socio-cultural milieu in which we are engaged, everyone is more or less aware of what the concept of sport means and how it is used.

The approach this paper takes adds to the current thinking by emphasizing the embodied nature of human understanding, an understanding which is enacted within our fundamentally embedded and interdependent human condition. It illuminates how sport at its best is a practice that conveys the values needed for living well together. It lays out the interpretations and understandings that inform neo-liberalist thought and how these create a life-world which is anathema to human well-being. It shows how the work of sport has been colonized and undermined by neo-liberalist understandings, along with the adverse effects this has on human life. The paper finds that resistance to such thought and the practices it informs is within our grasp, working at the margins and arising through our co-creative interactions.

2. Understanding Neo-Liberalism and How We Got There

Human beings are caught up in a life that is messy, unpredictable, dynamic and challenging. Any life-world is a sedimentation of historically informed forces shaped by on-going interpretation, understanding, interactions, and the resulting socio-economic-political structures of those who have gone before us. In our current age, the forces that have come to dominate have entrenched an interpretation and understanding of the world that conceals our fundamentally interdependent, embedded and embodied human condition. During the period that became known as the Enlightenment (1685–1815) many upheavals took place in England and other European countries. As Bowyer has discussed, these upheavals included "the enclosure of land held in common to establish private property; the mechanisation and industrialisation of the production of goods and services; increased urbanisation and the growth of cities; faith in the power of science and technology to explain and control the world; the growth of bureaucracy; globalisation of the market"[6]. This was not a linear progression and there was resistance along the way. These transformations drastically changed people's way of life in complex and contradictory ways. They broke up communities and created food insecurity for some. At the same time, they lifted others out of poverty, improved health and increased lifespans. They enabled some to prosper and others to be exploited. They created access to material goods for people who had been unable to access them before. Social encounters became fraught with danger as people moved to impersonal cities where norms were unknown. They opened up access to other countries through colonization and trade.

These transformations opened the door to a capitalist economy—a socio-political-economic system that prioritises the interests of capital above all else, making the pursuit of profit the end game[6]. The ideology that shapes this socio-political-economic system is known as liberalism. Its current iteration is referred to as neo-liberalism. Perhaps what was not foreseen at the time was the hold that liberal/neoliberal ideology would have on all aspects of life, especially as its horizon was scaled through colonization and driven by corporations and elites who were set to reap its benefits.

Theories and models of liberal/neo-liberal political, social and economic practice were developed by Thomas Hobbes[20] and John Locke[21] in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Theories are a result of an intellectual process that arrive, not through pre-reflective embodied and embedded living, but through abstract thought. Hobbes based his ideas on a mechanical model of the world and a mechanis-

tic account of human psychology. This is an unfortunate interpretation, as our human life-world is not predictable, repetitive and rigid like machinery. Instead, it is ever-changing, creative, spontaneous and unpredictable. Forging on with his interpretation, Hobbes argued that rationality, understood as an instrument to achieve our self-interested desires, tethered to monetary transactions, would yield the most efficient form of human association. Society should therefore be a rational creation organised along the lines of a legal contract, in which individuals have rights upheld by the political body. For Hobbes, the legitimate human community was based on power, fear, competitiveness, and the defence of human greed[20]. Liberal ideology with its roots in Hobbesian understandings was further developed and modified through the theorizing of Locke. Locke consolidated the rule of law in defence of private property—seen as life, liberty and estate—and argued for limited forms of government to allow individuals their freedom, which was understood as the freedom to make a profit[21]. Their ideas have been honed more recently by the economist Hayek, who understands human liberty exclusively in economic terms. For Hayek, liberty is something that can only be achieved through "a policy which deliberately adopts competition, markets and prices as its ordering principles," while limiting government intervention[22,23]. Neoliberalism has been taken to the next level, but along the same lines, by the economist Friedman, in his work *Capitalism and Freedom*[24].

Neo-liberalism has imposed a new world order on all the places it has colonized, obliterating or pushing to the margins other ways of thinking and being. It has created a narrative—a way of living and communicating—which conceals that interrelatedness is the point of departure, framing human interactions in a very different way. Its starting point is the idea that the isolated individual is the basic social unit. Human groups are viewed as aggregates of individuals who coordinate their discrete projects in a transactional way as the need arises. Any relationship the individual enters is only considered necessary to satisfy one's self-interested desires and preferences. The concepts that neo-liberalism embraces float free from our embodied, embedded and interrelated life-world. This is a problem. If concepts and the language in which they are conveyed are not grounded in our lived reality, they reach a level of abstraction where there is nothing to stop how much they are manipulated to suit someone's purpose. Subsequent arguments based on these abstractions further disengage from our human way of being. For instance, Parfit takes the abstract concept of the isolated individual as the starting point for this theory of human identity. Based on this interpretation and understanding, he claims that identity is inherently individual and requires nothing more than that individual's psychological continuity, which he understands as an independent, internal, brain-based phenomenon[25]. However, as Guenther points out, we have been fed the (liberal/neo-liberal) individualist narrative for so long that "as relational beings in an individualist society, a good deal of what we take to be our own intrinsic properties and capacities are in fact social practices that rely for their coherence and vibrancy upon interactive feedback loops with other social beings in a shared situation"[26]. Who I am is not based on some abstract, isolated inner capacity for psychological continuity. My complex interrelations with others within the flow of my shared life-world provide a perceptual and existential orientation through which I come to understand the world and my place within it. They anchor my identity and existence[26].

Work done with people who have been starved of relationships with others in a shared, meaningful world, corroborates the significance of these things for our identity. Guenther's research with prisoners kept in solitary confinement demonstrates how identity fragments and vanishes in such situations. One person she interviewed who spent 5 years in solitary confinement explains: "The very essence of life, I came to learn during those seemingly endless days, is human contact, and the affirmation of existence that comes with it. Losing that contact, you lose your sense of identity. You become nothing"[26]. On the outside, in our everyday world of social interaction, we are free to undervalue the role that our relationships with others play in supporting our own capacity to think and perceive and make sense of who we are, as someone, somewhere. As Guenther notes, "we can indulge in the myth of individual self-sufficiency, without having to live that myth. Only the prisoner in solitary confinement is forced to occupy the position of an isolated individual, and to bear the full weight of his existence alone, without the support of others, taking the blame for his own collapse"[26]. The prisoner's lived experience in solitary confinement attests to this.

Another dominant feature of the neo-liberal narrative is

the emphasis on instrumental or calculative thinking, sometimes referred to—like Hobbes—as rationality. Instrumental thinking is based on prudent self-interest, requiring a cost-benefit calculation to figure out the best way to achieve an end, regardless of what it takes, and regardless of the ethical implications of that end. It reduces human interactions to transactions. Thus, neo-liberal institutions orchestrate a society—understood as a quasi-cooperative group of isolated individuals—in which individual social units relate to one another in terms of contractual arrangements in order to achieve their goals. Although it has created a highly controlled, superficially efficient, and functionally organized society, the implications of this theoretical model on our human existence are devastating. By denying the reality of our human condition, the dominant neo-liberal narrative continually undermines our ability to flourish. The construction of neo-liberalist practices based on individualism, contracts and transactional encounters is at odds with a nurturing, supportive and uplifting human existence.

3. Method

The path of thinking by which we pursue a matter is its method. This paper takes a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach that attends to the meaningful lived world of engaged, embodied human interactions as the dynamic wellspring of understanding[1]. It recognizes that through our embodied existence, which is integrated, oriented by, and continually in touch with the world, we act in ways through which we make sense of ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in[1]. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, in continual dialogue with the human life-world, is an attempt to interpret, understand, clarify, articulate, and remain attentive and responsive to the narratives we engage with[1]. Thus, implicit in its path of thinking is its open-ended and necessarily incomplete character. In continual dialogue with the human life-world, its purpose is to work to reorient our attention to that which has become obscured[1,27]. In doing so, it brings things out into the open in order to move towards a new horizon of understanding. Doing this work necessarily involves interpretation. Thus, as those who work with a hermeneutic-phenomenological method are always standing within a particular horizon of understanding and its pre-judgements, its method is fundamentally self-critical. Seeing beyond one's own horizon is not impossible, as implicit in our human way of being is an openness to other ways of interpreting and understanding the world[1,6]. Consequently, we can call ourselves into question and transcend our present understanding, which leads to personal and social transformation.

This paper lays out an interpretation and understanding of sport as something that is fundamental to our human way of being, showing how people come to embody values that uphold human well-being through their embodied engagement in sport at its best. It then shows how the neo-liberal horizon derails the nurturing work that sport is capable of and hence, how it has made sport complicit in undermining human well-being. The paper considers three sports narratives that illuminate how this has created adverse outcomes for those involved. These narratives are spread across time and show that neo-liberal understandings are not just a passing phase, but have become deeply entrenched in our life-world. They range from children's sports games to high-performance environments, showing that neo-liberal thinking has permeated all levels of sport. They highlight the problematic nature of human interactions when they are understood as transactions for personal gain. They also show how an emphasis on winning-at-all-costs shapes our thinking and being in a way that can lead to actions that appear rational within a neo-liberal horizon, but which lead to significant harm for those involved.

Although our lives have become increasingly defined in terms of commodities, consumers, transactions and profit, these interpretations are sitting in tension with other ways of living that work to uphold the values of care, respect and human dignity, along with the ways of being that make these values possible. Although at the margins, these other ways of thinking and being exist as a site of resistance and possibility, and a place for positive and life-affirming identity formation, recognizing that human beings have worth that goes far beyond economic value. This paper goes on to discuss some of the practices that sit at the margins and how they can be engaged in the struggle to overcome the pernicious effects of neo-liberal thinking in a sports context.

4. Sport as a Communal Practice

Sport is part of our historically embedded communal story. As noted above, it is important to think about language and the work that it does in revealing a particular way of life. When we attend to the word sport, we find that there is a consensus that it came into parlance in the 1400s. It began as the word disport in the 1300s and was a derivation of the Old French word desporter, literally meaning 'to carry away'. This in turn, has its roots in the Latin dis- (away) and portare ('to carry' or 'to bear')[28]. It was not used in its dominant modern sense as competition until the mid-nineteenth century. Interestingly, this is at the end of the period known as the Enlightenment, when instrumental thinking (rationality) came to the fore, pushing other ways of thinking to the margins. This gives us cause to consider what the meaning of this word, grounded in our historically embedded, engaged communal lives, is saying.

There appears to be two things that the word 'sport'—to carry away—points to. First, when we engage in the activity of sport, we are literally carried away into a realm that is removed from the everyday work required for our basic survival. As sport transcends our basic survival needs, its work in human life must serve a different purpose. Given that our human form of life is embedded and enacted within community, there need to be ways of communicating across generations the values and way of life that are significant to that community, so that people learn the art of living well together. Sport, along with stories, songs, sculptures, paintings, carvings, dance and drama, can be interpreted and understood as repositories of learning about the world. Their messages help to constitute the horizon of intelligibility through which people come to understand themselves and the possibilities open to them. At their best, the messages they transmit help to guide enriching relationships between people and uphold ways of living that are fitting and sustainable for creatures such as ourselves. Many of these practices also show what happens when we don't do a good job of it.

Second, this leads us to consider what it is that we carry away from sport when we engage in this communal practice. Camus gives us insights into this. In a television interview on 12 May 1959, he states:

> "Only in team sports played in my youth have I ever known that overpowering sense of hope and solidarity that goes with long periods of training, leading to victory or defeat on the day of the match. Really, the little moral philosophy I know I learned on the soccer pitch and on the stage; those were my two real universities"[29].

Here, Camus points to two communal practices—sport, in the shape of soccer and the dramatic arts—both of which transcend our basic survival, but which can be considered fundamental for our human existence. For Camus, the significance of sport seems to be its ability to provide the conditions for embodying and enacting something meaningful and subsequently affording a place to reflect on the values that oriented those meaningful interactions.

Others have also interpreted and understood sport as a meaningful activity for such reflection. Fowles states:

> "I am convinced that watching sports makes us better people. What other arena offers both an escape from the trials of life and a place to diligently learn how to live it, a place to both relax and do the necessary work of becoming more human? I certainly know this game has helped me become whole in ways I didn't think possible, made me care about and connect to things outside myself when I was feeling isolated and insular"[30].

Kadlac has also noted that through sport we can come to reflect on what we do and how we do it and to "think about (our) own pursuit of the good life"[31]. He describes how watching sports enables us to see the various ways that people excel or fall short of the mark, and this provides us with the opportunity to consider what contributed to such an outcome[31]. Kadlac notes that when watching sport, we see "character traits on display that we admire and aim to cultivate, as well as traits that we may strive to avoid"[31]. In other words, we see "a range of possibilities for how to make our way through the world"[31].

Although we can reflect morally on situations that we encounter when reading books, watching plays or going to the movies, which are other practices that inform our cultural imaginary, Archer and Wajtowicz point to the merit in learning from a variety of sources[32]. They understand that the embodied activity on the sports field provides us with

a different perspective on approaching life's challenges[32]. Through watching a game or an event, we can learn about practices such as loyalty, perseverance, dignity, and courage and how these can be embodied and enacted in a variety of situations on the sports field[32].

It seems that participation in sport at its best—whether as a player, a spectator, or an official—can be understood as a meaningful activity through which we come to embody and enact ways of being that are humanly significant. Along with the other practices from which our cultural imaginary emanates, sport helps to weave and pattern our cultural fabric so that we come to embody a shared, normative way of life. Through such patterning, we are also weaving together our identity as someone, somewhere who can uphold and participate effectively in that way of life.

Staying with the soccer (football) example that Camus alludes to, we can see that it is about more than just putting a ball across the goal line or winning the game. As James commented: "The aim of a football team is not merely to get the ball to a certain goal (if that were so, they would simply get up on some dark night and place it there), but to get there by a fixed machinery of conditions—the game's rules and the opposing players"[33]. In all sports, like in everyday life, there are normative standards and rules that frame how we do things around here and shape our horizons. These are the fixed-machinery of conditions that James alludes to. If people are to share a form of life, those rules and norms must be consistent and transparent so that we learn what we ought to do and ought not to do in particular circumstances. They frame the possibilities open to us and enable us to reprimand others when they stray from an appropriate path and commend them when they respond well. Without such shared norms, people are left bereft of the guidance needed to navigate their world and appropriately steer their actions.

If it were the case that winning the game was all that was at stake in sports, then once a team had won there would be no need to participate anymore. But this is not the case. People return time and time again to the pitch, the court and the track, striving towards a common endeavour. Our human condition is such that we continually strive towards some future way of being[1,34]. Our everyday strivings can take a multitude of forms: getting out of bed in the morning to go to the gym; getting to school on time; rebuilding a community after an earthquake; finishing an essay; catching a fish for dinner.

This continual striving or struggle that is fundamental to our human condition was called *agōn* by the Ancient Greeks. *Agōn* implicitly involves people aiming at *aretē*, the dispositions, or qualities of character needed to do things well. No one sets out to deliberately do something badly; this would be a deficient or pathological way of living, undermining their own flourishing as well as that of others in their community. The Greeks understood *áthlima*—athletic ability—as exemplifying *agōn* and *aretē*. It is something achieved through careful training, guided by skilled others who have been there before us. In sport, as in everyday life, resting on our laurels is not an option. We return to the sports field, the track, and to everyday life, continually striving to play our role well. In the process of doing the best we can, we contribute to lifting the game—or improving our community. How we conduct ourselves in our roles, whether in the sporting arena or in the community, says something about our identity, for it is our embodied interactions with others that speak of who we are. This is captured nicely by the philosophically witty author Terry Pratchett:

> "If the striker thinks he scores
> Or if the keeper cries in shame
> They understand not the crowd's applause
> I make, and hear and earn again
> For I am the crowd and I am the ball
> I am the triumph and the blame
> I am the turf, the pies, the All
> Always and ever, I am the Game.
> It matters not who won or lost
> Nothing is the score you made
> Fame is a petal that curls in the frost
> But I will remember how you played"[35].

Whether we win or not, the way we conduct ourselves can still serve as a triumph.

When we engage in sports of any kind, we are participating in a form of life that requires cooperation. This is the case whether it is a team sport, like soccer, or an individual sport such as the high jump or sprinting. In a team sport, the need for cooperation is more obvious—people must work together and fulfil their specific roles if the team is to perform well. However, the art of cooperation is also needed in relation to our opponents. This is why cooperation is crucial in individual sporting events as well as in team events. In

order to have the opportunity to compete in an individual sporting event, we are dependent on the cooperation of those who share the same common aspirations. Without the agreement of one's opposition to play by the rules, to appreciate the value of one another, to honour the boundaries of the activity, and to work towards a common aim (scoring a goal, jumping over a pole, running over a line), there would be no sport in which to participate.

Thus, all sporting activity, like all communal activity, takes place within a cooperative milieu in which there is mutual understanding about what is acceptable and unacceptable to do around here. To act contrary to the norms of the sport would be to violate their shared meaning and undermine what makes sport worthwhile, given that it is intimately bound up with who we are and what we should do. This does not rule out good-natured rivalry or a few gripes at those who we felt had pushed things a bit far, or a groan over a close-call decision. But together, over time, we learn how to interact appropriately with one another, within the spirit of the game, by gauging the responses of others to the things that we do. This is also emblematic of our everyday lives, whereby cooperation and negotiation are constitutive of a thriving community. If we are to work well together, everyone must have the opportunity to develop a sense of what needs to be done, the possibilities open to them, and the ability to trust their actions and those of others.

Returning to Camus' example of soccer, and thinking carefully about the rules and standards that frame our engagement within the game, we can see that those rules work to sustain a safe environment for participants. We are all vulnerable creatures, but some of us have greater vulnerability in certain circumstances than others. Awareness of vulnerability is exemplified in soccer. For example, there are rules that stipulate 'use your feet only—no hands'; and around the use of feet, there are other rules prohibiting players from kicking one another and causing harm. The general rule of 'use your feet only—no hands' is modified for the most vulnerable player on the pitch, the goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is also given protective gloves and a zone which others have to be outside of when the goalkeeper is holding the ball. Transposed to everyday life, such rules serve as a reminder that in a community we are all vulnerable and need to abide by rules that will keep us all safe. It also highlights the need to make exceptions for our most vulnerable members, having atypical things in place to keep them, and sometimes the rest of us, safe.

The rules and expectations, along with the techniques of the game or activity, are learnt over time through practice by those who participate. Guided and supported by others, people come to embody and enact a way of being that is fitting and sustainable in that particular situation, trusting themselves to engage responsively and responsibly in a shared common practice. With a unity of purpose, the thoughts and actions of those involved are attuned to one another, with a mutual striving that exemplifies the qualities of character to achieve well. A participant nurtured in this way comes to understand the game. Caught up in the stream of activity, they spontaneously apply their skills and abilities, responding creatively to the unpredictable, dynamic situations they encounter. The outcome is open and unknown, and not under their control and requires a responsive flexibility to situations as they arise. This is what makes sport anticipatory, fun and exciting. The same goes for everyday life.

Zmigrod has investigated the importance of this cognitive flexibility. Her research over a decade with thousands of people across the world has found that those who have embodied flexible and creative ways of thinking have more adaptive responses to life's challenges. They are also more open to different perspectives and welcome ideas that show better ways of doing things. That is, they become adept at seeing beyond their own horizon. In contrast, a person who is more cognitively rigid struggles to adapt, even when confronted with evidence that their ways of doing things are detrimental. They will embrace obedience and conformity because it feels safe[36]. Zmigrod discusses ways that people with more rigid structures of thought can cultivate their potential openness—which is implicit in our human way of being—when it has been closed off by growing up in an environment that is not conducive to nurturing flexible thinking. Consequently, how someone thinks is vitally important for resisting the authoritarian structures and constricting practices of everyday life, whilst at the same time finding imaginative and creative ways of responding to the situations they find themselves in.

When we attend to our human condition, we can see that we are fallible creatures who make mistakes and misjudge things. In sport, the referee, those who run the line, or the umpire are given the task of making judgment calls in

regards to the state of play at a given moment, in keeping with the rules and norms of the game that those involved are bound by. Like every other player in the game, the qualities of character of the officials are honed over time as they develop the appropriate discernment that enables them to execute their role well. In some situations, when a call is close, even the most seasoned umpire will make a mistake. However, when sport is viewed as a communal activity embodying a unity of purpose, how such mistakes are dealt with shows more about the people concerned than about the mistake itself. For example, if the person running the line in a football game sees the ball go out across the side-line, but calls a player from the wrong team as the one who touched the ball last as it went out, it is up to the player who really kicked it out to throw up a hand and admit to that. The game benefits from the honesty of this move. It acknowledges that mistakes are made and at the same time shows that we have ways of dealing with that, giving us a dignified way of moving on with things. Such gestures raise the stature of the game as well as the regard in which we hold those involved. One such instance of this kind occurred in the final minutes of a West Ham versus Everton game in December 2000. With the score sitting at one-all, West Ham player Di Canio finds himself receiving the ball while well-placed to score. However, there was no goalkeeper in the net, as the Everton goalkeeper Paul Gerard lay injured on the field. Instead of taking the opportunity to score and seal the game, Di Canio's interpretation and understanding of the situation led him to catch the ball and insist that the goalkeeper be treated before play resumed[37]. His actions exemplified a dignified response to the situation, putting the well-being of his fellow athletes and the integrity of the game ahead of securing a win. Our communal life also benefits when we uphold one another's well-being and act with honesty, transparency and forgiveness as the need arises, if we are to move things forward in dignified ways and live well together.

5. Undermining the Social Practice of Sport

The integrity of sport is continually threatened by neoliberal forces which subvert its important role of inculcating the values needed to live well with others. Increasingly, sport itself is now considered just another commodity to be consumed, along with the athletes who participate. The economy of sport has become part of industrial consumerism, replacing the mutual striving that arises out of solidarity with a forum for self-promotion, whereby people use any means at their disposal to enhance the market value of the goods they sell. And as part of the economy of sport, the commodities that they promote and sell in this social space, colonised and administered by market forces, are themselves[38,39].

This has led to the remaking of relationships in sport (as in other aspects of life) along transactional lines. With a focus on utility and self-gratification, the bonds of solidarity are unravelled, and the shared devotion to a mutual purpose is undermined. Bowman has argued that in an instrumentally driven consumerist society, the tying and untying of human bonds are considered to be a morally adiaphoric (indifferent or neutral) act[39]. This then relieves people of the responsibility for one another and makes using others for one's own ends a permissible activity.

Within the constantly moving stream of people, products and money which constitute market transactions, those engaged in sporting activity now have the task of making themselves stand out in order to catch the eye of a sponsor, a corporate sporting body, and the media (who will make them more visible and saleable) in order to become noticed and hence, become a coveted commodity. For, as Bowman has argued, "in a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams and fairy tales are made"[39].

Within such a mode of life, it becomes easy to see how self-aggrandisement will triumph over a mutual striving to bring out the best in everyone. It becomes apparent how a sense of solidarity is effaced when the idea of winning at all costs destroys the notion of cooperation. When the concepts of winning and losing become construed as success and failure in a competitive market model, we can see how a do-whatever-it-takes attitude overshadows careful moral consideration. When success in sport requires you to get noticed and make yourself stand out from the crowd, this do-whatever-it-takes attitude comes to prevail, instead of an attitude of mutual striving, respectful interactions and care for oneself and others.

This pernicious instrumentalization of sport (along with other facets of our world) infects not only those involved in professional sport, where professional has come to denote

getting paid considerable sums of money, but also contaminates all aspects of sport. At all levels, people's interactions with others within the sport have been affected, along with the relationships with spectators at sports events, as well as our regard for and understanding of sport itself. Sport has become merely another means to the end of garnering money, whether in the form of getting sponsorship, a lucrative contract, gambling, sports-associated merchandise, furthering one's career, the purchase of tickets for the game, a subscription to a sporting media network, or some other novel way in which money can circulate through the forum of sport.

To expand on these points above, this paper lays out three sporting narratives from my place in the world, Aotearoa—New Zealand. Aotearoa—New Zealand was colonized by Europeans in the 1800s. Informed by Enlightenment thinking and ideals, those who came here forcefully altered the economic, political and cultural life of the people already living there—*tangata whenua* (people of the land—sometimes referred to as *Māori*)[40]. The *Māori* way of being was radically reformulated by this colonization, which transformed relationships with people and the land through the imposition of western science, economic expansion and socio-political practice[40]. Together, they pushed *Māori* ways of thinking, understanding, and being to the margins, instantiating what we now understand as neo-liberalism as the only game in town. However, against this historical background, there is a rising awareness (for some people) that neo-liberalism must be resisted and transformed if people are to live well together. Although such resistance and transformation are still at the margins of life in Aotearoa, they are joining with ideas and concepts from *Māori* ways of thinking and living which still thrive at the edge of the dominant narrative. These ideas and concepts recognize and embrace the complex interdependencies that weave us together, so that for people to flourish, we need to hold them with *manaakitanga* (within nurturing relationships; taking care how others are treated), and we must attend to the situations we find ourselves in with *aroha* (love in its deepest sense of upholding people with dignity and respect)[41]. The concepts of *aroha* and *manaakitanga* are woven into the stories, songs and daily practices of traditional *Māori* ways of living and thinking, so that people come to embody a way of being that holds one another well. They anchor a language of hope and possibility that counters the hegemony of neo-liberalism. Other places around the world in which neo-liberal structures have come to dominate can no doubt find similar stories to the sports narratives explored in this paper. They will also have traditions that work at the margins from which they can access alternate concepts and practices that underpin a more nurturing way of life, helping to free their thinking and ways of living from the neo-liberal gaze.

The narratives that this paper lays out illuminate how neo-liberal ways of being create adverse outcomes for those involved. They are: the use of erythropoietin (EPO) by marathon runner Lisa Hunter-Galvan; the abuse of referees at children's sports games; and the death of professional cyclist Olivia Podmore. The narratives are spread across time and show that neo-liberal understandings are not just a passing phase but have become deeply entrenched in our life-world. They range from children's sports games to high-performance environments, showing that neo-liberal thinking has permeated all levels of sport. They highlight the problematic nature of interactions when they are understood as transactions for personal gain. They also show how an emphasis on winning-at-all-costs shapes our thinking and being in a way that can lead to actions that appear 'rational' within the neo-liberal horizon, but which lead to significant harm for those involved. To counter neo-liberalism's dehumanizing tendencies, this paper then proposes alternative ways of interpreting and understanding the way we engage with sport, empowering interactions that hold people well.

6. Results

Narrative 1—The Use of Pharmacology to Enhance Sporting Performance

Only four New Zealanders feature on the Olympic and Commonwealth Games list of banned-substance users—Lisa Hunter-Galvan is one of them. Hunter-Galvan, a marathon runner, represented New Zealand in the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games. She was suspended from further competition by the New Zealand Sports Tribunal on 28 August 2009 after she tested positive for erythropoietin (EPO). EPO is a hormone used to boost red blood cell count. The word erythropoietin comes from the Greek *erythros* (red) and *poiesis* (to bring forth), as the use of the hormone brings forth red blood cells in the body[42,43]. It is used in medical conditions such as anaemia resulting from situations of chronic kidney

disease, or the use of chemotherapy. As the promotion of the growth of red blood cells increases the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood, the drug is taken by some endurance athletes. It is one of several substances used by some athletes to enhance performance [42,43]. After testing positive for EPO, Hunter-Galvan admitted to using the substance on three occasions.

Hunter-Galvan was immediately ostracised by the New Zealand athletics community. This response to her error of judgment says more about the people concerned than about the error itself. Within the horizon that informed their thinking, there was no place in which any care or concern for her as a fellow human being could be made manifest. Although Hunter-Galvan would have shared experiences with the athletics community, it was not a community underpinned by mutual responsibility, support and understanding. Instead, within neo-liberalism's horizon, it was a group of individuals who understood themselves as independent and self-reliant, with no responsibility for one another. This then made it easy to dispose of Hunter-Galvan. Jude Ellis, who was the director of the drug-testing and investigation programme, stated: "We can sympathise with athletes who unintentionally dope either through stupidity or ignorance. But really we have very little sympathy for those who dope intentionally, especially high performance athletes who should know better" [44]. Ellis's tone conveys the contempt in which she holds Hunter-Galvan. She is quick to blame her—understood as an isolated individual—for what she regards as Hunter-Galvan's personal failings. Ellis also sets up the binary of we and you, making it very clear that we take the moral high-ground, and you have failed. Hunter-Galvan was never part of a we that was caring, kind and supportive. The transactional we that Ellis refers to is based on a relationship which is only maintained if it is viewed as beneficial. Hunter-Galvan was dropped once she was no longer useful. Losing her place in elite sport and having the New Zealand athletics community turn their back on her would have shattered her world, and her identity as someone, somewhere would disintegrate. It is reported, however, that New Zealand athletes Peter Snell and Lorraine Moller supported Hunter-Galvan through the difficult times of self-denigration that followed her ban [44]. Both Snell and Moller would have understood the wider socio-economic-political context in which sport is situated and the range of forces acting on athletes that would have steered Hunter-Galvan into taking such action. The values that motivate our actions are never detached from the circumstances that produce them. If we think about Hunter-Galvan's position, it is possible to see how her use of EPO could be interpreted as rational in a framework where winning at all costs prevails and losing is an existential failure, even if on some level she also understood it to be a poor choice. We are not aware of the complexities of Hunter-Galvan's situation that led her to this course of action. Not all athletes find themselves taking this path. But the moment in which she stepped on this path, she could perhaps see no other way of staying at the top of, or at least in, the game. Snell and Moller's support would have been crucial for providing a place for Hunter-Galvan to do the work to make sense of her situation. They would have held her in being, so that she could still understand herself as someone, somewhere worth caring about. Learning about how her situation may have unfolded is crucial, albeit painful, for making sense of things, for taking appropriate responsibility, and perhaps, for using her story to help others. It matters how we move forward after any ordeal. The pain will persist, but we can learn to live and work with it and diminish its paralysing hold on us.

A look at the wider neo-liberally informed context in which Hunter-Galvan was situated illuminates the setting in which her actions unfolded. Hunter-Galvan was performing in the Olympic Games, which, along with its governing body, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), have become a business like any other. Many Olympic athletes now have an entourage of professional agents to manage their affairs in order to exploit their athletic triumphs to the full. This takes the form of hooking into large corporate sponsorships and signing up to endorse consumer products, which includes everything from underwear and perfume to meat. Winning a gold medal in a high-profile event is a high-stakes activity, as it can secure some lucrative deals. Hunter-Galvan had invested her life in athletics. But when it is shaped by market forces, continually striving towards a common endeavour is no longer a primary motivation. As a self-branded commodity circulating in the economy of sport, only winning will secure a return on investment. Sport under this horizon has lost sight of the fact that whether we win or not, the way we conduct ourselves can still serve as a triumph.

Hunter-Galvan was also operating in a world where various scientific endeavours have made a range of products

available to athletes as a means of enhancing performance and thereby become a visible commodity. Science is seen as a legitimate practice, so the things it produces can be uncritically understood as acceptable. However, the practice of science has not escaped the forces of the market, and embedded within corporations, it requires athletes as consumers to purchase and endorse its products. Driven by profit-maximization, science has become an instrumental force operating in sport and has delivered 'better training techniques', 'improved diets', and, of course, pharmacological products, all of which are touted to aid performance. Immersed in this high-stakes world of professional sport and presented with a smorgasbord of products that claim to be able to take you to the top of your game, it becomes harder and harder to discern what is appropriate and what is not. So much so, that the boundaries of the acceptable and non-acceptable use of performance-enhancing drugs in sport are highly contested territory.

A considerable amount of ink has been spilled in arguing for a way that performance-enhancing drugs can be made to seem acceptable and hence can be given a legitimate place in sporting events[45]. The arguments are convoluted and rely on conceptual confusion and thin understandings of human beings, as well as narrow concepts of autonomy and rights that stem from the same emaciated interpretation and understanding of human life that informs neo-liberal ideology. Wittgenstein reminds us that instead of arguing ourselves into a corner, like some of the arguments for performance-enhancing drugs end up doing, we can come to understand an issue by shifting our perspective. By doing so, we come to see how our interpretation and understanding of a situation has created the issue in the first place. As Wittgenstein explains, when we do this ,"the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves, and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment"[46]. When we shift our perspective and see sport from a different horizon, we become aware that sport can express values and forms of interaction that contribute to human well-being. From this perspective, using pharmacological substances to improve performance would be both unthinkable and unnecessary.

Unfortunately, the horizon of neo-liberalism has made what was once unthinkable, thinkable. When human liberty is interpreted and understood exclusively in economic terms, through policies which "deliberately adopt competition, markets, and prices as ordering principles"[22,23], every aspect of life becomes a commodity that can be exploited for monetary gain. From within this horizon, there are no boundaries to achieving this end, as this would be interpreted as impeding human freedom. So it was only a matter of time before the unthinkable was thought, bringing into existence The Enhanced Games, which took place on May 24, 2026, in Las Vegas. It was a privately funded event led by Australian businessman Aron D'Souza[47]. Forty athletes competed in the games, and watching the event was by invitation only[48]. A number of athletes around the world criticized the staging of the event, understanding that it would further undermine the integrity of sport[47]. Athletes that did compete were set to earn 250,000 if they won a race and 1 million if they broke a world record[48]. The invitation-only status of the event meant that people who would ask difficult questions about the games were excluded[48]. Questions that need to be asked would be focused on the well-being of the athletes and the adverse effects of the drugs permitted. For instance, the side-effects of testosterone—used for increasing muscle mass and strength—include mood instability, depression and aggression. The use of EPO, discussed above, is associated with blood thickening and cardio-vascular incidents[49]. These side-effects and others are well-documented in scientific and medical research on these substances[49]. So, important questions to ask include: Are the organisers of the games doing anything to monitor the well-being of athletes using the substances that are permitted and encouraged in The Enhanced Games? Will they provide support and treatment for athletes who suffer long-term health issues after using these substances? Do athletes have to take the products developed and sold by the Enhanced organisation?[48]. A look at their website would seem to suggest that, as Wisely notes, the games are just a sales conference to promote the range of substances that the company Enhanced is endorsing[47,50]. For the Enhanced Corporation, the athletes are just a means to be exploited to achieve corporate success, which is understood as maximising their profit. Their interest in the long-term well-being of athletes does not seem to figure.

If we are concerned about the well-being of athletes, we cannot look to neo-liberalism to find any answers. Instead, attending to other forms of living and thinking that embed

values consistent with human flourishing can open horizons that enable us to understand different approaches to training athletes. Research by Crawley and Burns discusses how "athletes from Ethiopia and the nearby East African nations of Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea and Tanzania filled 69 and 74 of the top-100 spots in the 2025 World Athletics marathon rankings for men and women, respectively"[51]. They explain that in these countries, training is understood as a collective endeavour, requiring a great deal of trust and reliance on others. Athletes work as a group, having the responsibility of leading sections of their training runs between them, each doing their duty as pacemakers[51]. Ethiopian athletes also interpret and understand the process of expending and monitoring energy as a collective responsibility[51]. As such, they are called on to "share their energy with their teammates"[51]. Energy is understood as a "limited and trans-bodily substance which must be carefully monitored and protected, as it can flow between people, as well as between people and their environments"[51]. This interpretation of energy as a limited substance requires a complex ethics of training to ensure that it is shared between everyone as evenly as possible[51]. It enables a mutual striving that brings out the best in everyone. Ethiopian athletes have a huge amount of expertise in endurance running that has been refined and honed over time. This cumulative knowledge has been called 'fugitive science' by Rusert, a professor of Afro-American Studies[51]. Rusert advocates for both the significance and value of embodied understanding accumulated over time, and the knowledge embedded in other ways of interpreting and understanding the world[51].

Another form of living and thinking that puts athlete well-being at its centre is the South Korean community-centred training that embraces culturally informed intergenerational transmission structures to inculcate *jeong*-mediated we-ness[18]. *Jeong* is understood as a thread that becomes woven over time through shared, lived experiences, and it arises from an ethos of care[18]. When *jeong* is woven into the web of interactions with others, people feel a mutual responsibility to protect, support, and care for one another[18]. South Korean culture is formed on an understanding of we-ness (uri), recognising the interconnectedness of all things[18]. Thus, their language speaks of our training, our sister, our struggles, recognising these fundamental interdependencies.

Open to working with understandings and concepts from one another's training traditions—such as those from Ethiopia or South Korea—or other places that recognise our fundamental interconnected and interdependent lives—athletes can come to embody a range of cooperative training practices that empower them to enhance one another's well-being in a trusting environment.

Narrative 2—Abuse of Referees at Children's Sports Games

On 2 July 2016, Mason Lawrence, the head coach of the Oriental–Rongotai rugby team, received a six-week suspension after getting "in the ear" of an assistant referee during the team's Jubilee Cup game against the Upper Hutt Rams[52]. On the same day, rugby coach Jason Aitken, coaching the St Bernard's College Under-55kg school team, was "stood down for several weeks after continually giving the referee a hard time over calls made"[52]. That people feel that they can legitimately communicate with one another in this way reveals how the way of life that they have come to inhabit does not put respect and human dignity at the forefront of their interactions. They assume that they can do-whatever-it-takes to achieve whatever they want. To someone colonized by neo-liberal thinking, talking to a referee in this manner might seem like a rational thing to do, as it is a strategy that might achieve your end of getting a call overturned in your favour. Fortunately, in this instance, the values still embraced by the sports officials and their clubs were able to send a message—through their sanctions—that the coaches' actions were not acceptable.

Football referees have fared no better. Surveys have shown that 30 per cent of referees who left the role did so because of abuse[53]. Such abusive actions communicate a complete disregard for the humanity of the other. A number of cases of abuse and threatened assault on referees in New Zealand attracted media coverage, so that in 2008 the New Zealand Federation of Referees recommended the adoption of a RESPECT programme. New Zealand Football's RESPECT programme includes:

> "Roped-off areas for parents and spectators; signed codes of conduct for players, parents, coaches and referees; clear sanctions for breaches of the codes; only allowing the captain to speak to the referee"[53].

Such externally imposed authoritarian responses as these are required when people no longer see themselves as part of a common endeavour, and lack the ethical bonds that shape their actions towards one another. In such a situation, people cannot be trusted to do the right thing. Being able to enact responses that rightfully position ourselves in the world with others has been recognised by some as the basis of human freedom [54,55]. It is a view of freedom that is diametrically opposed to the neo-liberal view, where freedom is understood as the freedom to make a profit, unimpeded by others.

Coaches and team officials, parents, spectators, and players all now seem to feel that abusing the referee is a legitimate response in certain situations. These situations all centre on personal gain. This may take the form of a player denying the ball came off them as it went out in order to gain advantage; a coach feeling that a member of his team was unjustifiably penalised for an action and thereby lost advantage; a parent wanting to see their son/daughter selected for a representative team, and thereby become successful, anxiously thinking that any reprimands might count against their chances; spectators wanting their team to come out on top, thereby taking any opportunity to question referees' calls against them. Such abusive action towards another in order to further one's own ends, is only thinkable in a competitive market society, as its instrumental, transactional understanding of relationships legitimates people using one another in any way. Those involved have lost sight of the fact that human beings are fallible creatures who might make mistakes and misjudge things. Their interactions do nothing to uphold the dignity of those involved, including their own.

As the referee is operating in a game already colonized by neo-liberal understandings—winning at all costs; the end justifies the means—the chances that a player will admit that they are at fault when a call is made become fewer and fewer, even at youth level, where players follow the example of senior players. In a society shaped by instrumentally driven transactions, the trust required for open, honest, responsive interactions cannot be easily formed. At the same time, when we see others just as a means to our ends, the responsibility we bear towards them is concealed. This is why the rule of law and its written contracts—consolidated by Locke [21]—has come to dominate in a society that is shaped on, and as a corollary shapes people on, a transactional basis.

To counter the dehumanizing tendencies that are colonizing sport, Archer and Waztowicz maintain that sports fans need to be critical fans [32]. We can apply their insights to all spectators at sporting events, whether they are there to watch a family member play, there to support the team, or there watching and coaching a team. Being a critical spectator also requires us to be critical of fellow spectators and the sports clubs and sports officials themselves.

A critical spectator cannot ignore injustices that occur on the pitch, the court, the track, or the sideline. They are unable to condone the verbal and physical abuse of officials or players. A critical spectator embodies values that interpret and understand these actions as harms. They also expect sports clubs and their participants to endorse values that uphold the dignity of all involved. Being a good critical spectator requires standing up for these values [32]. The struggle that spectators face is to turn their awareness of injustice and harm, and the realization that they must do something, into strategies for change. Resisting and transforming oppressive behaviour can be challenging. Archer and Waztowicz suggest that a way to begin could be by physically moving away from those who abuse participants [32]. In time, others will notice, and if they intuitively feel that something does not sit right with them, or if they have reflected on what they have observed and are not comfortable with it, they too will move away [32]. Moving away in silence is a powerful way to send a message of non-acceptance. It leaves open a space for others to join you on their own terms and creates a place for questions and conversations about what else can be done. By forming a group that opposes abusive behaviour, the group embodies a unity of purpose in upholding the values that are fundamental to sport at its best. This group is explicitly condemning such abuse, showing that there is a better way of being a spectator. The people involved are stating: "This is what spectators should be like, join us, not them!" [32]. They are making a public stance about the values they hold to be important, in solidarity with one another. As Archer and Waztowicz have also noted, moving away from an area where abuse is occurring is protective, removing the temptation to join in with inappropriate behaviour [32]. Taking these actions means that people are helping to maintain the ethos of the game and its role in inculcating codes of conduct that care about and respect athletes and officials as human beings, engaged in their own pursuit of a good life. In turn, others

have the opportunity to be transformed by watching a game that shows such conduct.

There will be people willing to stand up for the life-affirming values of care and respect and the importance of maintaining human dignity, even if at the start just a few people do so. Over time, through observing or through conversations with others, more people will become critical spectators and help to nudge sport back to its fundamental role in human life. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, there is a growing awareness that these values are important for cultivating a world in which we can all flourish. Together with a growing understanding of the concepts of *aroha* and *manaakitanga,* which ground a life-enhancing *Māori* worldview, ways of reimagining the world are taking place. The pockets of resistance arising from the margins carry with them hope for positive transformation.

Narrative 3—The Death of Professional Sprint Racing Cyclist Olivia Podmore

In a consumer society, everything must be disposable to make room for more of the novel, whether that is the next fashion in music or clothing, the faster electronic device, or the younger protégé. In sport in its current incarnation, this takes the shape of continually finding someone faster, stronger, or willing to endure more to win. The hot housing of athletes is a way to achieve this.

Olivia Podmore ended her own life on 9 August 2021 at the age of 24. Podmore represented New Zealand in the 2016 summer Olympics and the 2018 Commonwealth Games[56]. In 2015, she moved to Cambridge from her hometown in Christchurch to train with the New Zealand cycling team. She was part of the Cycling New Zealand High Performance Programme, a centralized hot housing programme run as a business, designed to train athletes in a high-pressure environment with the aim of securing medals. Athletes in this environment are viewed as contractors and are poorly paid and must find other sources of funding to keep themselves fed, housed, and in the programme[57].

Following Podmore's death, an independent inquiry into Cycling New Zealand was conducted in August 2021, and a report based on their findings was issued on May 16, 2022[58]. The report stated that "such a funding model is at odds with the wellbeing of athletes"[58]. The report also acknowledged that "removing young athletes from the support networks of their family and friends and placing them into a pressure cooker environment was a recipe for disaster"[59]. The inquiry also found that athletes feared reprisals if they raised issues of concern about coaches and management. They knew they could jeopardise their sporting opportunities if they rocked the boat within the organisation that they relied on for their existence as an athlete[58]. The inquiry also noted that there was a lack of transparency around the selection of athletes for events[59].

Following the 2021 inquiry into Cycling New Zealand, further inquiries into complaints by athletes involved with other sports resulted in the establishment of a Sports Integrity Commission in July 2024[60]. Its remit was to provide independent oversight into New Zealand sports and respond to serious complaints about abuse, unfair and unsafe selection processes, harassment, sexism and bullying[60]. However, athletes who made complaints found that their concerns were not addressed, and the people implicated faced no repercussions. Some of the athletes involved pulled out of contention for Commonwealth Games places because of investigation delays[60]. Questions around the Integrity Commission's effectiveness abound, with athletes recommending to each other to "heal themselves" because they are not going to get timely or appropriate support from the Commission[60].

In her final social media post before her death, Podmore spoke of a culture of bullying, blackmail, and a disregard for the well-being of athletes within Cycling New Zealand[57]. She outlined the demands made on athletes in high-performance sport, speaking out in death and saying the things she could not say in life, for fear of reprisals. Her friend and fellow cyclist Eddie Dawkins, who retired from high-performance cycling on his own terms, stated: "I hope Cycling New Zealand get their day. I hope High Performance Sport get their day. Surely there were red flags with Liv. Where was the movement? Where was the discussion … around making sure she's alright and getting the help she needs? It's not going to be the last time that someone attempts this on themselves. Without positive change and actual change, we're just putting a Band-Aid on a serious issue"[57]. Dawkins maintains that "athlete well-being should be at the forefront of training, and performance should be the by-product"[57].

Johannsen, a journalist, has followed and reported on Podmore's story throughout the inquiry into Cycling New

Zealand. She has also reported on the issues athletes have faced with the Sports Integrity Commission. Johannsen attended and reported on the coronial inquest into Podmore's death, in which details were revealed about what Podmore had endured as a vulnerable human being during her time with Cycling New Zealand's High Performance programme. Podmore entered a downward spiral when she raised concerns about her coach in relation to an affair he was having with a fellow athlete[61]. She was derided by her coach for raising this issue. He also undermined her confidence by belittling her and calling her useless. At her first race in the 2016 Olympic Games, her coach refused to take her up to the starting line[61]. Traditionally, this is the coach's role, a move that signifies a sign of respect, acknowledging that the athlete is up to the challenge and that they stand by them. Podmore would have correctly interpreted her coach's refusal as a sign that she could could not trust him to do the right thing by her and that she did not have his support. It would also have been understood as a message of disrespect, conveying the contempt he held towards her. Such an action would have shattered her self-worth and undermined her trust in her own abilities.

Testimony by the coach's former wife stated that he (Podmore's coach) would "berate Olivia on all aspects of her personal life. Who she was seeing and when, what she ate, the size of her bottom, her haircut, how many boys she slept with and more. It was relentless"[61]. The coach had become part of a way of life in which he was unable to see Podmore as a fragile, vulnerable human being and he did not view his role as one of support, trust and validation. Instead, he interpreted and understood his role in a transactional way, for his own gain. It gave him power over others, and he used his athletes for his own benefit, whether that was for sexual pleasure or his amusement. Within the culture created by her coach and reinforced by the Cycling New Zealand hierarchy, Podmore also became a scapegoat that allowed others to achieve at her expense. She was bullied by her teammates, who feared that their own cycling careers rested on the existing structures being maintained[61]. None of Podmore's teammates embodied a way of being that enabled them to respond in a fitting way to the stresses that she endured. Neither did their training environment afford a place to reflect on the values that were motivating their interactions, which were devoid of care and respect. The High Performance Programme did not create the conditions in which mutual care and responsibility could be fostered. Instead, it allowed a do-whatever-it-takes and win-at-all-costs attitudes to prevail. When Podmore was struggling with the situations that unfolded around her, an environment built on transactional encounters abandoned her. No one held her in being as someone somewhere, to help her make sense of her struggles and find a way forward.

The inquest was also told that several people had attempted to inform Cycling New Zealand about issues they had with this coach. However, confidential information expressing their concerns to Cycling New Zealand was shared with the coach, leading to more targeted bullying of Podmore and others[61]. Following the release of the review into Cycling New Zealand, the Chief Executive of the organisation wrote to Podmore to inform her that he saw "no tangible value in taking disciplinary action against those alleged to have harmed her (and) on behalf of Cycling New Zealand (he was) declaring the matter formally closed"[61]. Such brutal words and lack of action by Cycling New Zealand's Chief Executive Officer thereby condoned the conduct of the coach, turned a blind eye to the wider structural issues of the organisation, and reinforced the values that informed its existence. There was a blatant disregard for the effect these outcomes had on Podmore and how, by refusing to validate her lived reality, it dishonoured her humanity.

Following her battle to get recognition of the toxic culture in Cycling New Zealand and the continual undermining of her well-being by those who should have been there to support her, Podmore's mental health deteriorated. In the months preceding her death, Podmore was seen by six different health practitioners, including three team doctors from Cycling New Zealand[61]. Each of the team doctors proposed a different course of action to address her deteriorating mental health, but there seemed to be no follow-up or accountability[61]. The denigration and indifference Podmore encountered during her time with Cycling New Zealand forced her, in Guenther's words, "to occupy the position of an isolated individual and bear the full weight of her existence alone, without the support of others"[26]. By the end, she felt that she no longer mattered.

That someone should end their life that they have dedicated to excelling in sport is an indictment of sport co-opted to further neo-liberal values. A sporting environment with a do-whatever-it-takes attitude, working within structures

designed for winning medals and getting a good return on investment, is anathema to upholding an athlete's humanity and providing the support, care and respect that people need from one another. To make the positive change needed that Dawkins calls for, the training of athletes needs to be interpreted and understood very differently. In light of the inquiry into Cycling New Zealand and the coronial inquest into Podmore's death, there have been changes to the rhetoric and some of the practices of Cycling New Zealand. In their 2026 high performance promotional video, they state that they no longer require athletes to attend a centralised hot housing programme and allow them to train in their home community with their coach [62]. They speak of "having fun" and "asking for help" if needed [62]. They state that they run training modules on "well-being during selection" and "well-being during competition" [62], as if these were simply add-ons to the programme. They still have individual performance plans, and talk in terms of contracts, KPIs (key performance indicators), and portfolios, which is the language of market transactions. Some funding is now available for athletes who are "able to deliver at the Olympic Games" [62]. They claim to run a values-based programme, and their values are: "excellence, integrity, continuous learning and sustainability" [62]. They list the things that they will and won't do as part of the programme. On the won't do list is 'win-at-all-costs' and 'create a toxic environment'. However, instead of winning, they now speak of getting athletes "podium ready" [62]. It remains to be seen if their horizon has changed significantly in ways that put athlete well-being first and foremost.

A more substantial change could involve learnings taken from the Ethiopian marathon runners discussed previously. There must be accumulated, in-depth knowledge sitting with past and present cyclists that could enable those currently training to find uplifting and sustainable ways of working together and supporting one another. Cyclists could become a community of athletes engaged in the collective pursuit of getting faster, instead of working on individualised, precisely engineered training plans. Training would become less about monitoring bodily inputs and outputs and utilising data, and more about "creating a balance in training between different kinds of environmental conditions and learning to share energy with others" [51]. Under such transformation, it is less likely that a culture of bullying, blackmail and disregard for the well-being of athletes could prevail. Training in a collaborative way, athletes come to understand one another and hold each other well, as they work on a shared project. It is more likely that a collaborative community of athletes would ensure that each was doing well and getting the help that they needed, as the totality of being human requires. Many athletes already know the importance of this we-ness for upholding well-being. It requires that "athlete well-being should be at the forefront of training, and performance should be the by-product" [57].

7. Conclusions

The struggle to be better people within community is always an on-going activity and part of our human story. No one has *the* solution, but we can do better. Like learning and playing a sport, it requires attuned responsivity, flexibility, and persistence, and there are no guarantees. And currently, for our very survival, we still have to engage with neo-liberal practices and institutions in order to earn a living, buy food, and have a roof over our heads. The best we can do is ensure that our interactions continue to nudge things in the right direction, and consider alternate ways of being that can free us from neo-liberalism's grasp. Our interactions are a crucial part of this change, and even small moves, like stepping away from those who are abusive towards others, send valuable messages that resonate in the world in ways we may never be aware of. However small, it is important that we make these moves, because we understand that they are the right thing to do, they matter, and they continue to shape and reinforce the sort of person we want to be.

The pockets of resistance that are active at the margins can also help us reimagine our way of being. This is something we can do, as creatures who are capable of flexible and creative thinking and are thus open to change. Ways of thinking and living that have resisted the language and framing of neo-liberalism provide different perspectives, values, concepts, and practices that offer life-affirming alternatives. Coming to understand these perspectives and embracing their concepts are important steps if we are to co-create a way of living that nurtures and sustains people in ways that are uniquely human. Attending to and incorporating different perspectives also keeps the work of change fresh and invigorating and expands the web of people who also uphold life-affirming values. Working with others to stay as close

as we can to the path we feel is right is essential if we are to co-create a world in which all can flourish. Restoring sport to its fundamental place in helping to embody those values is part of this path. Disentangled from the dominant neo-liberal narrative, both sport and our way of life will benefit.

Human well-being cannot be achieved through a world based on hyper-individualism, transactional encounters, winning-at-all-costs, and a capitalist economy that puts profit before people. Instead, it depends on living well with other people in a particular place, so that we become somebody, somewhere within a socio-political-economic milieu that values and upholds us all. Acknowledging that economic activity is important for enabling the flow of goods and services amongst people, it is imperative that we recognise there are other ways of enabling economic activity that may fit more appropriately with our human condition. For instance, people working at the margins have shaped economic structures that put human well-being (and planetary well-being) at the centre, such as Doughnut Economics, Wellbeing Economy, Regenerative Economics and Inclusive Growth. It is not the work of this paper to evaluate these alternatives, but to point out that they are there, and that a capitalist economy is not the only game in town. Changing the shape that our economic activity takes will not be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is. If the values that inform our economic activity changed, it would mean that the way that we interact would change. It would change the way we think about the world and our place within it. Our language would change to convey our new way of thinking and being. Our political, legal, and social institutions would change, in order to structure and uphold this new economic reality and our changing social practices. A new horizon would be created that would inform and embed a different life-world, with human (and planetary) well-being as its foundation. Wherever we begin change, as it picks up momentum, our entangled reality moves with it. Sport, embedded in a world that is grounded in human well-being, would then be in a position to do the work it is capable of. The seeds of resistance are there at the margins; the planting is up to us.

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