

Sports and Bullshit: Philosophical and Ethical Aspects of Athletic Entertainment

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Aim

After decades in the backyard of the sports world, professional wrestling (henceforth, pro wrestling) has grown to be an integral part of the sports entertainment industry. Through many films and TV series, this spectacular hybrid of athletics and theatrical performance, has become a common cultural, social and political reference. The question is, though, what we should make of this. What does it say about our time, and about the relations between sports, entertainment, politics and the sports market in terms of ethics? Obviously, pro wrestling can be controversial, not least when read in political and ethical terms. This is not new. Already in the 1930s, some raised questions in that regard, for example the American writer Christopher Isherwood (2012). After watching an obviously staged fight in the streets of Berlin in the early 30s, Isherwood drew the conclusion that the spectators seemed to be indifferent for what is true or fake. Or, differently put, “the show” was everything, but with disturbing political implications embedded. Basically, what Isherwood really saw was nothing less than a political moral that foreboded the Nazi tyranny. However, also “true” sports (and not just the staged imitations of sports) have been accused for embody unsound values reinforced and exploited by political and commercial interests. Also from that particular point of view one might claim that even if “true” sports is considered to be more true than the art of pro wrestling in terms of how we usually understand the concept of sports, pro wrestling functions as a distorting mirror of the reality of true sports. And from the view of sports entertainment, pro wrestling mocks the logics of true sports but without the uncertain outcomes. Apart from the basic fact that true sports, contrary to pro wrestling, contain what some calls “the sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome” (Loland 2002), pro wrestling seems to be the hyperreal version of true sports. The ethical aspect of this consist of not only a difference between “low brow” entertainment (pro wrestling) and “high brow” entertainment (true sports), but also concerns the difference between truth and falsehood when it comes to sports from the view of entertainment. The question is though, if it is always morally worse to believe in “fake” sports than in “true” sports? How should this be conceptualized?

Theoretical Background

In his 2005 modern classic *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt draws attention to the distinctions between truth, falsehood and bullshit. In his theory of bullshit, Frankfurt suggests that we have reason to differentiate between liars and bullshitters. A liar, Frankfurt claims, do in fact care about the truth – but tries to hide it. A bullshitter, on the other hand, is indifferent when it comes to truth and falsehood. Based on this, one might even say that it may be morally worse to be a bullshitter than a liar. Following these distinctions but applied to the issue of sports entertainment, I would suggest that imitations of true sports might very well be considered as truer (as in more real) than the “true” ones, dependent on our cultural preconceptions of sports and truth. Consider, for example, the fact that true sports sometimes (or often) accommodate hidden symbolic aspects that are not supposed to be openly shown before the spectators (Barthes 1991). This may be seen as a form of deception. Based on this one have reason to test the assumption that the “bullshit” of pro wrestling functions not only as a mirror of true sports, but more important challenge the very ideas of what true, real and authentic sports means as being an integrated part of the growing industry of sports entertainment.

Methodology

Methodologically, I will provide a series of arguments according to common philosophical methodology. It means that I will try to find solid and sustainable arguments and examples in support for the assumption that the deformity of sports reflect some of our most common preconceptions and ideas of true sports, including some important ethical concerns in relation to sports and entertainment.

Discussion

What this investigation may lead to, is somewhat a new (or, renewed) understanding of the ethical implications when it comes to a “fake” versus “true” sports in the light of sports entertainment.

References

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