

- 1 Sport is first and foremost a form of organised play. The dual use of the word “player” as both sporting participant and actor is not accidental. When we play, we step out of our conventional state. We create our own stage, take on new roles and identities, make and tell ourselves fantastical stories. Sport is also a form of improvised popular theatre; its apparatus of challenges, contests, competitions, unknown outcomes and final results is like a vast polymorphous machine for generating improvised and compressed stories. 5
- 2 Sport generates meanings and pleasures in a multitude of other ways. The movement and choreographies of some sports evoke the same pleasures as dance. And in many sports, the crowd is unquestionably the chorus, not only supplying ambience, commentary and income, but actively shaping the tone and the course of the game. The opportunity that this provides for the collective dramatisation of identities and social relationships, both spontaneous and organised, is without parallel in the field of global popular culture. Indeed, Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, has claimed that “sport is global culture.” The Olympics, for all their faults, remain the most significant global celebration of internationalism. No language or religion reaches as far, geographically or socially, as participation in and consumption of the world’s leading sports. 10 15
- 3 Yet taking sport seriously seems a contradiction in terms. All sport, however much it has been commodified, regularised and organised, is in the end just a complex form of play. Calculated by the stern and quantifiable metrics of utility, efficiency and safety, sports are nonsense. Using metal sticks to whack a tiny ball across half a kilometre of sculpted landscape into a tiny hole is serious? Ski-jumping and hitting a ball against the wall? Even as ideas they are preposterous. Sport demands of its participants and spectators a leap of faith, a suspension of reason, an abandonment of many conventional values and judgements, as a precondition of accepting that these games do matter. The leap of faith takes us into a world freed from instrumental reason, where the pressures of modern society have no rightful place. That such a space can exist in a world that can appear deformed by the reach of money and power is a serious prospect indeed. 20 25
- 4 Serious organised play cannot be purely spontaneous. If we wish to watch the spectacular, to participate in its grand narratives, we need rules and rule-making institutions; we need facilities, stadiums and professional athletes. Spectaculars require backers; the circus must be paid for. Sport needs, attracts, and must deal with money and power, and the backers will always be looking to buy or take their share of glory. How are we to police the line between the realms of power and play, economic space and social space? The production and consumption of modern sport clearly is political, albeit with a small “p.” 30 35
- 5 What would a healthier sporting culture look like? It would start from two ideas. Sport should be treated with the same seriousness that is accorded to the performing arts. Additionally, it should be judged by the same standards of transparency, sustainability and democracy that we expect elsewhere in public life. Many things follow from this, but let us consider some. First, let’s get our histories right. All modern sports revel in their own histories and use them to manufacture contemporary meanings and pleasures. The keeping of systematic records provides a constant set of comparisons between teams and individuals across the generations. Narratives of clubs, tournaments and traditions of styles of play provide a rich seam of interest in sporting competition. However, in both official and popular idioms, it has been mainly a manufactured history that we have been offered: concocted myth, detached from the wider economic social and political context in which it has occurred. The results are at best drearily sentimental, and at worst scurrilous cover-ups of past injustices and misdemeanours. We must insist on better. 40 45

- 6 Second, can we improve the conversation? While there is nothing wrong with sporting professionals becoming media commentators, there is also no reason to think that they possess a monopoly of wisdom on sporting matters, nor that past sporting glory can make up for any amount of present-day guff. At the very least, let's have other voices. Sports reporting will always be full of cliché, repetition, hurried speech and slackly organised thought: the frenetic nature of the modern sporting calendar guarantees this. But the room for improvement is still vast. Media outlets should do fewer interviews with fewer people. When they do, they should not ask closed questions, or request impossible forms of quantification— "Just how important was that win to the club?" Commentators, especially on television, should not feel that it is their duty to fill every passing second with comment. As the red button option on the BBC during the last World Cup proved, there is a big appetite for just the sounds of the games themselves. 50
- 7 Third, writers and reporters, politicians and publics, participants, spectators and their various representatives need to address themselves to the now epidemic problems of unregulated power and money in sport. Global sport is awash with accusations and evidence of cheating, deception, fraud and corruption. The standards of governance and openness that are the norm in global sport would not past muster in the most primitive of democratic polities and legal systems. 55
- 8 We need to balance private capital's opportunity to make profits from football with its duties of care. The argument begins with the link between professional sport and the wider sporting culture of society—pub teams, school sports, youth leagues, participating, watching, following and talking. Without this sub-stratum, sport at the highest level would be impossible. All professional sports organisations should bear considerable responsibility for their bases. Horse racing's betting levy is one example of a transfer of private income back into a sport's infrastructure; others should be considered. 60
- 9 Finally, at a time when no aspect of social or political life can absent itself from the debate on climate change, sport needs to take a lead. The prevalence and low cost of air transport has been a key factor in the geographical expansion of sporting competition. The World Cup, the Olympics and all the other regional and global competitions generate a vast carbon footprint as a result of gathering so many people in so many places. Meanwhile, all sports that have a direct environmental impact—especially skiing, motor racing and golf—have some serious thinking to do. Understandably, however, there is among the sporting public a distaste for the intrusion of these kinds of political considerations into their play. 75
- 10 The world of sport is one in which most of us at different times and in different ways are participants, spectators or commentators; it is a world in which we can delight in contradiction, a social space that is dependent on the state and the market but knows how to hold them both at arm's length. This space, after all, is not merely where we play—it is where the good life must be lived. 80