

# REGARDING PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT: OLYMPIC PUBLICITY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY\*

HANS LENK

**Abstract.** The main thesis of the paper is that sport is a realm of activity in which genuine personal action in the original psychophysical sense is still not only possible but rather the paradigmatic case. Achievement is not purely a natural entity: it is at the same time a psychophysical, sociocultural and spiritual, even philosophical, topic and a central anthropologic category; also, a vehicle of self-understanding and self-development. Without achieving, performing man, *homo performer*, could not make much sense of his life, his higher life aspirations. The cultural being is the achieving being, and personal acting is important for a creative life. Sport, among other creative activities, may be and should be a genuine vehicle of human creativity.

**Key words:** achievement, *homo performer*, Olympic philosophy, sport, telecracy

## I. Olympic Philosophy and ‘Telecracy’

Let me begin by quoting Cicero, a leading witness of ancient thought, and by drawing two inferences from this quotation – one pertaining to the aims of our Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport, the other one to a “new” social phenomenon of the Olympics and top level athletics which, however, is not so new.

Cicero wrote:

Pythagoras ... replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble the festival, i.e. the festival at Olympia [Diogenes Laertius VIII, 8] which was celebrated with most magnificent games before a concourse collected from the whole of Greece; for at this festival some men whose bodies had been trained sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, others were attracted by the prospect of making gain by buying or selling, whilst there was on the other hand a certain class, and that quite the best type of free-born men, who looked

---

\* The two major parts of this paper were delivered, respectively, as Opening Remarks and as the Presidential Address at the 9th Annual Meeting of the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport conducted October 15–17, 1981, at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. The paper is published here, as is customary, in its original form. First published in: *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 1982, IX, pp. 94–106.

neither for applause nor gain, but came for the sake of the spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. So also we, as though we had come from some city to a kind of crowded festival, leaving in like fashion another life and nature of being, entered upon this life, and some were slaves of ambition, some of money; there were a special few who, counting all else as nothing, closely scanned the nature of things; these men gave themselves the name of lovers of wisdom (for that is the meaning of the word ‘philosopher’<sup>1</sup>); and just as at the games the men of truest breeding looked on without any self-seeking, so in life the contemplation and discovery of nature far surpassed all other pursuits. (Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* V, III, 9)

Thus spoke Pythagoras – in my favourite quotation regarding the naming of that special “breed called” after that and still today “philosophers”; it is interesting for sport philosophers that their characterizing label was once introduced in connection with the Olympic Games of antiquity! I definitely hope that philosophers of sport will display the wisdom needed for their difficult task to analyze, try to understand and maybe make a philosophically justified sense of this both fascinating and intriguing activity of sport in any of its forms.

Perhaps – and now I proceed to the second inference – Pythagoras was not too far from the truth, even though he could not foresee the impact of television and the new telecratic function of the Olympics, when he thought that Olympia was a marketplace apt for publicity. This insight was reserved for the *New York Times* (April 4, 1976) which wrote: “The main function of the Olympics is to provide television entertainment.” I think this a one-sided contention. However, I shall not be dealing critically with it here. Let me instead present some other related, controversial statements of public opinion. Let us stay with the *Times*; whether of London, New York, or Japan, they have always delivered expounded judgments of the Olympic Games. In 1924 the *London Times* quoted George Bernard Shaw’s sarcastic aphorism, that the Olympic Games are only one more tool for the confrontation of nations, and added that world peace is too precious to be sacrificed on the altar of international sports. We could state today instead: that the Olympic Games and Sports are too precious to be sacrificed on the altar of international “Real-politics.”

The *Japan Times* once (1964 or 1972) sarcastically stated that the Olympic Games would be cheaper than wars and nevertheless would fulfil the same function. This type of cynicism, burdening the Olympic Games with all dimensions of politics, has apparently lost all sense of correct proportions. Sport cannot be a substitute for conventional war. On the contrary: According to the goals of the founder of the Olympic Games, de Coubertin, as stated in the basic principles of the International Olympic Committee, the Games are intended to gather the world’s youth at a great quadrennial sport festival to create international respect and goodwill and help build a better, more peaceful world.

---

<sup>1</sup> By the way, this is reportedly the first occurrence of that phrase and concept of ‘philosophy’ in the ancient literature!

The Olympic Games, undoubtedly, have suprapartisan political influence: They have no directly effective peace mission as it is sometimes alleged but they constitute a symbol of a better world, an understanding among the sports youth crossing all national and cultural boundaries: Their practical, humanitarian and cross-culturally sociable character furnish the values and goals of the Olympic Movement with the identity and union of an international and intercultural movement. They are a fascinating symbol of the unity of mankind in its higher aspirations. In this, the ambiguity and vagueness of many of the Olympic Idea's fundamental values can and did lead to a social effect of assembling and affiliating and toward an extended multicompatibility as well as multiidentifiability of the Movement (Lenk 1964, 14ff. et passim). At least in part the intercultural collective effect is a function of the inspecificness, nonpartisan and cultural tolerance of its value system.

Thus, its famous contribution to an "understanding among people" occurs *indirectly* through being an effective symbol. The late IOC-president Brundage stated in 1972 at the Olympic Games of Munich that the Movement only has the strength of a great ideal. It is inappropriate to overload the Olympic Idea with the exorbitant demand of a substantial and significant peace mission and direct political functions. This perhaps even diminishes its actual social effectiveness. Its contribution should be seen indirectly as an effective, exemplificative *symbol* of political neutrality that develops a ubiquitously acceptable value system, which influences the unity of internationally understood goals and traditions, and offers public opportunities for developing understanding among representatives of various peoples and cultures.

In this sense, do not the Olympic Games – as a symbol of a peaceful unity of mankind and youth – reflect a positive and special *mythological* role, even today, besides the fact that in ancient history they were founded on a religious myth? (To be sure, "ideal type" symbols do have an important, quasi "mythical" effect, especially in a sober modern world which lacks enthusing goals, particularly worldwide goals.) If "myth" can be understood in an extended secularized sense, then this is certainly the case. "Myth" characterizes a model that illustrates a meaning and valuation and repeatedly reflects these symbolically. These interpretations of meaning have developed historically in cultural traditions. Their illustration is evident in typical, exemplary situations described dramatically. When by a dramatic staging and visualization well known concepts create or define meaning for less well known phenomena, myths develop and offer guidelines for meaning constituents and interpretations, both typifying and illustrating. In sports they create and transfer meaning in a visible way that is usually more dramatic and dynamic and often more festive than that of everyday life.

In competition the sport myth is prevalent as a symbolic role-playing drama. The roles fit together in the simplest confrontation in visible dynamics and drama. The dramatic presence of the event and the historical unchangeableness of each past action and decision under the judgment of an excited and enthusiastic public are notably effective. In the simplified confrontation of competitive athletics can be a symbolic, microcosmic illustration of almost archetypical role dynamics.

This dramatic and mythical materialization explains both the symbolic role and the athlete's or spectator's fascination for sport activities. This is especially stressed in the historical uniqueness of Olympic Games. Sport action, and especially the participation in the Olympic Games, is neither normal life in a nutshell nor the focus of daily life. In mythical symbolization and magnification it materializes a characteristically simple model of a vitally intensified, emphasized and contrasting mode of action in the form of role playing. The Olympic Games and the Olympic Idea are distinguished from daily life by their tradition, the history of the ancient and modern Games, the intermingling with intellectual and artistic symbols and philosophic and pedagogic concepts.

Top-level sport – especially in the form of Olympic competition – symbolically and dramatically reflects the basic situation and active “fighting accomplishment” of the athlete, who is, so to speak, the Herculean man of Western culture. The sport myth and its fascination are characterized by the self-expression and self-confirmation in aspiring achievement, the dream of mastering nature and acting rationally and controlled with a minimum of equipment, enhanced vitality, the desire to cross and remove limits (Ortega y Gasset 1955), risk taking, being prominent, surpassing existing achievements, the restriction to technically actually unnecessary goals and unnecessarily limited means for achieving these goals, as well as the dramatically dynamic role confrontation during competition. Masterful strength, swiftness, ability, body-control and endurance symbolize human capabilities through a quasi-mythical interpretation of man's fundamental situation. The fascination of sprint events, for example, cannot be completely explained rationally without referring to the symbolic “mythical” principle of the autonomous mobile human being, or to escape-chances and experiences, or to the attractiveness of conquering spatial distance through personal strength, initiative and achievement motivation.

Ideally, the athlete dares to enter a new field of human achievement behaviour, namely the field of a symbolic demonstration of strength, not over others, but over himself. Athletic achievements also offer flairful and adventurous opportunities for gaining distinction in a basically conformed society, which nevertheless emphasizes individual values. The Olympic athlete thus illustrates the Herculean myth of culturally exceptional achievement, that is, of action essentially unnecessary for life's sustenance that is nevertheless highly valued and arises from complete devotion to the striving for a goal difficult to attain. Through memory of proving oneself in athletic competition and of systematically learning discipline in training, true self-confidence does not only develop and gain from winning but also from honest participation in an Olympic or in another outstanding sporting event. As a person, the athlete builds up personal self-esteem by knowing that he has done his best (as Coubertin quote the Bishop of Pennsylvania in 1908: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part”). Looking back to these aspects the athlete may establish personal stability and continuity of personal experience, confidence or even distinction within a tradition. He had devoted himself to an extraordinary task and stood the test in his own and the others' eyes. Thus, Pythagoras was wrong in this matter: top-level sport, especially

Olympic athletics, not only compactly reflects normal life; it is also a symbol of an emphasized and exalted vital life. Pythagoras forgot the mythical interpretation that Olympic competition has for spectators and active athletes. His remark was undoubtedly aimed at the all-too-human habit of making myths too common an element of everyday life.

When an athlete like Fosbury discovered a new and victorious Olympic jumping style through intelligent variation; when the 10,000m runner Viren fell, but then jumped up to still establish a new world record; when the gymnast Fujimoto in Montreal attempted his decisive exercise on the rack with a fractured knee and completed his act with a double somersault seconds before he collapsed (and won gold for his team), one cannot claim that characterless, mechanic, systematized and manipulated muscle-machines have accomplished pre-programmed and planned achievements. Such cases have shown that athletic achievement cannot renounce extraordinary motivation, initiative, effort, personality, and devotion. This is particularly true today at an Olympic level; almost all sport disciplines require nearly total individual involvement in the attainment of unusual results. Within a system it may be facilitated and promoted, but it cannot be deterministically or mechanically generated. The feat is and will be forever individually accountable and ascribable. The athlete is not a characterless producer of records; he is a personality – with all heights and depths and abundant interesting variations, even and especially when he loses.

Thus, the outstanding personality (in terms of will power, self-devotion, and almost total involvement in a goal-oriented activity) may still be found in sport today. The athlete is a symbol of “the achieving being” (see below).

Although he could not predict contemporary aspects, Pythagoras was also right concerning the Olympics’ public and publicity effect, Olympic vanities, and journalistic market mechanisms: Olympia – and top level sport in general – is a market. It *is* a market for prominent personages and public debuts, a welcome opportunity for making personal publicity. It is not technocracy, positivism, capitalism or imperialism that characterizes the Olympic Games, as Neomarxist social criticism of recent decades has claimed. Actually, at surface level, their distinguishing features seem to be VIPs, publicity and television. But these are inevitable consequences of a publicity-oriented society that basically considers itself to be achievement-oriented, but that actually is a society devoted to social success, sometimes even to mock success, pseudoprestige, δόξα as Plato would have had it. But the spectacle of really or would-be important persons at Olympic Games is actually harmless and a rather amusing entertainment, if it does not disturb the contest. The active athlete is more troubled by the “telecratic” necessities: which bother him and other performing participants. Whizzing cameras sometimes irritate the concentrated contestant beyond necessity in a time when telephoto lenses are available. The sport show fascinates hundreds of millions of spectators since the mass media deliver direct colour coverage of Olympic events to all countries. Through gigantic “telecratic” inspection, the athlete’s rights, his optimal action and preparation strategies, even his human intimacy and the

preservation of his private personality, seem to be possessions of (or at least commanded by) the camera-eye of Big Brother. Future Olympic Games will increasingly be faced with difficult “telecratic” problems – not only in financial terms. It will not be easy to find a compromising strategy which simultaneously covers the public’s need for information and the athlete’s rights. We have to develop (and this aspect implies proper philosophical work) a kind of protection program for the athlete to secure his rights against the managers and constraints of the public media, including their manipulative and alienating effects. “Telecracy” is and will remain, even grow, to be a major problem of the Olympics and top-level athletics in the future.

In addition, the postulated athlete’s rights program has to pertain to his sovereignty and freedom of decision-making against autocratic officials and coaches (see below). The athlete, as a person with his specific human rights, has to be protected. Only this way he can really (in a humane sense of the word) fulfil his paragon function as an ideal model.

Pythagoras had rebuked the Games’ market and festival character: Olympic Games have lost the old religious values that were integrated in them within Greek culture. However, it is only this fact that has enabled them to gain worldwide attention. Secularization and independency of specific religions and myths always were and are a prerequisite for their accommodation in so many cultures and thus their worldwide effect. Even a certain ambiguity and multicompatibility has been a cause of the worldwide and successful Olympic “gathering effect.” The mythical factors only appear in the Olympics indirectly, formally and functionally in reference to values of methods and achievements, comparison and measurement. But they are important for the future of the Games. These factors especially require institutional regulation that is externally evident in forms, signs and symbols expressed in ceremonies and protocols. But externalization of symbols and institutionalization, even innovative reforms of the protocol and ceremonies by themselves are not enough. The Olympic spirit should remain alive and has to be adapted to modern requirements, for example, to the open-minded critical intellectuality of today’s younger generation. Such outdated components of the idea as, for instance, exaggerated nationalism, winning at any price, compulsive manipulation, the totally autocratic style of coaching, the dictatorship of officials, and other-directedness in motivation have to be eliminated, or at least mitigated. Ceremonial change cannot bring about this necessary reform.

In addition, we can hardly expect the new, positive concepts, these enthusing and exciting goals, novel guidelines and ideals from an empirical scientist who is usually restricted to his discipline. This intellectual reform of the Olympic Movement and sports is basically also a *philosophical* task (which, by the way, the XIth Olympic Congress last month at Baden-Baden did not even remotely approach). The new Olympic Idea remains to be born. The most important reorientation has yet to occur. It has to be a reform in the philosophical foundation, a renovation of the Olympic philosophy. Philosophers to the front! We, as philosophers, have to take seriously the fashionable criticism of the last decade

against sport and achievement orientation. We have to develop a new philosophy of unobtruded, freely chosen achievement actions and of the creative achieving being. In short, we have to delineate a new philosophical anthropology of both creative achieving and the achieving personality. We should also apply this philosophic anthropology to sport, science, art, play, and any creative action as well as to education.

Pythagoras, therefore, was right in a deeper sense when he was looking for philosophers to “closely scan the nature of things” connected with (Olympic) sports. The most important functions of sport are not just sport. They are and remain educational, societal and philosophical. Pythagoras – as an alleged Olympic athlete himself – apparently well understood some of the basic problems of top level sports. (So did Plato, see below.)

A well-founded philosophy of sport and creative achieving action is of vital necessity, and not only for athletics. Pythagoras was right in implying this.

## II. Toward a Philosophic Anthropology of the Achieving Being

Plato’s real name was not Plato, but Aristocles (as Diogenes Laertius, III, 4 told us). “Plato” derived from πλατυς (“broad”) and may have been Plato’s athletic name since he was a wrestler who participated in the Isthmian Games (perhaps, but we don’t know, also in the Olympics).

Plato thus apparently knew quite a bit about gymnastics, physical exercise and systematic training when he stated (Timaeus 89a), “Accordingly, of all modes of purifying or bracing the body, the best is gymnastic exercise,” and “Does not the physical state degenerate (dissolve) in rest and laziness, but much improve by gymnastics and movement?” (Theaethetus 153b).

In this address, I shall not be able to dwell at length on the traditional relationship between philosophy and gymnastics (or sport, as we call it today) through tracing the personal union of a philosophic and an athletic life in certain ancient philosophers, but I would rather like to point to another topic related to [the intricate relationship of sporting action and proper vivid life: Real life is personal acting, proper actions, and sport is a very convenient way or medium to act/to live in the original sense of the word. Thus, it seems that sport in a world of institutions shaped by administrations, delegations, red tape, etc., is one of the few reservations of proper actions, personal performances and vital life. Creative art, love and sex as well as philosophizing may be other realms of that land, that is, expressive media of genuine experience, action and performance for man. Man is not only – as European philosophical anthropology stressed – “the acting being” (Schütz, Gehlen) or “the tool-making being” (Franklin) or “the symbolic being” (Cassirer, Langer) the “polymorphically cultural being” (Gehlen, Marquard). Nor does it suffice to characterize man as the “ζῷον λογὸν ἐχὼν” the rational animal, or as the “ζῷον πολιτικόν” the social being (Aristotle). These definitions turned out to be almost as insufficient as Plato’s ironic definition of the featherless biped. Also, characterizations of man as the “decision making being” (Jaspers), “condemned to

freedom” (Sartre), as the working (Marx) or speaking animal or as that being who knows and has to organize his life under the recognition that it must die (somewhat along Heideggerean lines) or as the permanently risked being, will not do to capture the essence of man. The same is true for the characteristic properties of the being which is not yet ascertained and not yet determined (“noch nicht festgestellt” in the twofold meaning of Nietzsche’s word in German); of “the eccentric being,” and also the only one capable of laughing and weeping (Plessner); capable of objectivity. Let me add the permanent functional “transcendence” (Keller) or the biological characterization of the being of paucity born prematurely and almost lacking any natural instinctive disposition and determination (Portmann, Gehlen after Herder and even the ancient sophist Protagoras) thus being flexible, dependent on self-perfection, supplementation and culture as well as institutions (Gehlen). Man was also considered the being always obliged to arrange, settle and put in order things and himself, to reduce complexity (Luhmann) and to compensate (Marquard) for his notorious insufficiencies and dissatisfaction as well as suffering – the being in the making who has always to make himself what he is (Sartre).

One may add characterizations of man as the being which is capable of humour, irony and, probably with the exception of most philosophers, of not taking himself too seriously. Certainly, man is characterized by all these essential traits: He is at the same time *homo faber*, *homo cogitans*, *homo agens*, *homo loquens*, *homo ludens* (Huizinga), *homo laborans*, *homo creator*, *homo compensator*. All these characteristic features seem to encompass more or less necessary conditions, but no single one offers a sufficient condition and, thus, a clean-cut criterion of what man really is.

Any monolithic definition and theory of man seems to be doomed to one-sidedness and, thus, failure. A definition, moreover, cannot replace a whole theory referring to a very complex field and object. A philosophic anthropology, therefore, has to go beyond a single-factor approach; it has to develop a multi-factorial theory or interpretational model. It also cannot just summarize results of empirical sciences and humanities referring to man. But it must necessarily also include ideal type characterizations such as the mentioned features: and even normative functions, regarding ideal traits of what man should be under the auspices of his permanent orientation toward the good, or better, toward goals and tasks, hopes and life plans.

Any of the mentioned factors can only emphasize one facet of the total realm of what is human, all-too-human (Nietzsche): *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*, said Terentius. And this should be true also for an encompassing philosophy of man – for anthropology in general or philosophic anthropology in particular.

*Ecce homo – ecce anthropologia*. Neither can be monolithic. Nevertheless, even if this is to be taken into consideration, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to another rather specific trait of man not yet mentioned: Man is not only the acting being (Schütz, Gehlen) (i.e., the being consciously orienting himself toward goals), but he is more specifically the being who tries to materialize goals better and better by acting himself. He is at the same time the personally acting and performing

being. He is the achieving being, so to speak. Proper action, creative personal performance and accomplishment are necessary ideal traits of a real human being. *Eigenhandlung and Eigenleistung* – proper/personal action and proper/personal achievement are among the most specific designating traits. Real life is personal, proper acting and achieving; (achievement might ideally be interpreted here in the wider sense; later it has also to be understood in a more specific cultural sense, i.e., in the narrower sense of ever-improving quantifiable or measurable performance and accomplishments). We have a socio-psychological book on “The Achieving Society” (by McClelland 1961). Thus far, we have no real monograph about “the achieving being.” The philosophy of achievements is still in its infancy.

Without exaggerating this trait of the *homo performans* as the one and only trait characteristic of man let us deal a bit more with this feature and relate it – which is easy enough, after all – to sports.

First of all, I should like to do a little bit of pseudo-etymology: *homo performans*, *homo performer* – the achieving being has to use, to create and to orient himself at forms. He can only achieve via using and/or creating identifiable forms, structures: per formas. Thus, he depends on and is even obliged to externalize, to project his intentions, to achieve external products. Creative self-externalization only allows for reflecting, reflection (reflexion). Self-perfection is only possible by *performing*, personal achievement. This includes goal-oriented, even systematic, well-trained acting and performing – also in the sense the word is used in performing arts. Erving Goffman’s social psychology of “The Self in Everyday Life” (1959) comes to mind. Everybody performs parts, roles in the theatre of daily life. In some sense we are all actors playing in a great drama – be it a tragedy (hopefully not) or a comedy (a satyr play as in antiquity). By the way of forms (in the double sense of using forms and forming himself) *homo performer* comes to understand himself and to make himself what he is (Goethe) or is to be.

The achieving being is more than solely the acting being, the compensating being, etc. Nevertheless, this facet of man’s characterization clearly comprises the capacity of acting and action orientation, striving for goals, tasks and improvement. It contains the necessity of external projection (self-externalization into a non-ego) (Gehlen after Fichte) (including that one of non-I and non-me according to George H. Mead). It also implies the capacities of self-distancing, intentionality, self-reflection, functional self-transcendence (Viktor Frankl), and compensation, even overcompensation.

There is a famous slogan about the “totally administrated world.” We certainly live in a world of administration, institutions and mediation (by media and other mediating mechanisms, e.g., delegation, signing, etc.). Life-structures in highly developed industrial societies have become more abstract, indirect, reduced to particular media channels, passive adaptation, etc. Communication, though almost universal in scope now, has been mediated and abstracted. Action has been almost replaced by symbolic action. A signature is an action but hardly directly a real world changing one – it is a symbolic action. Actions have also grown more and more anonymous as regards addressees and affected people. In addition,

photography, film, television and even pictograms and comics have turned much of our world into pictorial preserves: a “codified world” (Flusser) apt for passive consumption, “World as phantom and matrix” (as Günther Anders already stated in the 1950s in the first philosophy of television). To quote Flusser: “The codified world in which we live, does not consist of processes or becoming (any longer) ... life if it does not mean acting” (Merkur 32, p. 378). After the mediation via reduction to consumerism is this again a reduction in the form of pictorialism (picturism) with its progressive tendency toward passivism? All well known mechanisms of alienation and manipulation within the “administrated world” tie in: institutionalization, bureaucracy (“red tapism”), functionalization, segmentation, symbolization, vicarious representation, delegationism, organizationism or even organizationitis and progressive ‘publicititis’. The trend toward a totally prefabricated world tendentially displaced proper personal psychophysical action toward ecological niches. Personal acting in the proper sense becomes a leisure hobby for the proverbial common man. In serious life he hardly acts any more, he is only condemned to functioning. Certainly this is an exaggerated picture. However, does it not contain more than a grain of truth?

To be human, to stay alive as a human being is to be active and creative – *homo actor, performer* and *creator*. Plato even defined life as – active – movement (i.e., movement of the soul) (Phaedrus 245c): “*παυλαν εχων κινησεως παυλαν εχει ζωης*” [When or where movement finishes, life finishes itself]. We can assimilate this with Schiller’s “Man ... is only completely a man, when he plays!” Man is only really alive as man when he acts and moves (physically as well as psychically).

Personal and proper action is a criterion of real life for the achieving being. Only he who acts, achieves and moves (something and himself) is really alive. Life in its deepest sense is goal-oriented action, is personal achievement, engagement and performance in the mentioned sense.

It is easy to apply the mentioned insights to sports and athletics. Our main thesis is that a sport is a realm of activity in which genuine personal action in the original psychophysical sense is still not only possible but rather the paradigmatic case. Sporting action and achievement cannot be delegated, vicariously achieved, pretended or obtained surreptitiously: In this sense the normal sport achievement is gained by personal endeavour and effort – it is, ideally speaking, a genuine and honest action resulting in an adequate assessment. Sporting action and performance requires personal and usually, at least in top-level athletics, almost total devotion and engagement. “Concern for bodily excellence,” to use Paul Weiss’ nice phrase, is nothing to play at or with loosely. Athletic action and achievement requires spontaneity, serious engagement and self-victory. Even leisure sports and play require personal effort, psychophysical and active involvement. Personal freedom in sports is to be found in the deliberate agreement with the rules as well as in the spontaneous and/or planned variations of action strategies within the framework and allowances of norms. It is also expressed in the vicissitudes and unpredictabilities of a competitive event. Finally, a personal sense of freedom might be gained and materialized if you successfully carry a victory over yourself of

symbolically over an opponent or a natural obstacle: examples (which I have recently experienced again) are a glacier wall of six thousand feet or the unavoidable weakness period in a marathon after 20 miles. In leisure sport the making up of the rules as we go along provides an additional means of expressing and constituting a freedom of action. Therefore, Adorno (1969, p. 65) and the Frankfurt School of social philosophy are wrong when they state that sport is essentially a realm of unfreedom wherever it is organized. To be sure, in top-level athletics there are at times dangers and instances of manipulation, alienation or even compulsion exerted on athletes by officials, authoritarian coaches, public expectations of spectacular records, pressure of public opinion, journalists, etc. But these are deviant phenomena not meeting the paradigmatic case of a free, voluntary athlete. Only an athlete who is freely devoting himself to a strenuous regimen of training is capable of extraordinary accomplishments: You can command somebody to march but not to establish a world record.

The ideal models of the so-called “emancipated and enlightened athlete” (“mündiger Athlet”), of his “sovereignty” and of the so-called “democratic” (i.e., conceptionally participatory) style of coaching have been elaborated in the realm of practical coaching crews at Ratzeburg during the 1950s and ‘60s. In 1965, in a speech at the occasion of the German Championship in rowing I summed up the insights from my practical experience in rowing and coaching (I coached a world champion eight-to-be at that time) leading to the ideal type model of the “emancipated” and “enlightened” athlete. The results regarding the “democratic” style of coaching were based also on the late Karl Adam’s experience, the most successful and erudite (scientifically and philosophically minded) coach who had revolutionized the methods of coaching then. It is only now – after roughly two decades (although the mentioned article was translated into five languages) – that the insights are getting some widespread public resonance in practice. For the first time athletes were allowed actively to contribute to the Olympic Congress at Baden-Baden. And they gave a fine presentation, indeed. Even the President of the International Olympic Committee admitted that they had been the best speakers. Sebastian Coe, the last speaker of the athletes, deliberately stated that the inclusion of the athletes in the Olympic Congress “and the tenacity” with which they “have grasped” their “tasks kills if not buries the common misconception that athletes are unthinking robots.” This was the most important and – except the active Olympic appearance of female athletes and former athletes as well as a liberation of the eligibility rule – the only really historic event connected with the Olympic Congress which otherwise was boring and brought nothing new of even a qualified intellectual level. Prime Minister Mzali of Tunis (a member of the IOC), for example, submitted the only paper on the Olympic philosophy but he only gave some old-fashioned hortatory advice regarding the educational value of Olympism (including the usual wrong quotation of the “*mens sana in corpore sano*”) instead of “*Optandum (e)st ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*” (Juvenal). Olympism would be “a quest for the best” and the Olympic philosophy “a cry for joy, a homage to the enthusiasm of youth” – indeed a total flop regarding philosophical content.

But let us go back to our topic of proper action and personal achievement. One might be tempted to relate this general thesis to the philosophy of life of the first third of this century, particularly to Jose Ortega y Gasset's philosophy of sport and sporting life. Sport is, according to Ortega, characterized by a spontaneous discharge and display of excess energy and strength exerted without profit, economic and other external interests. Phenomenologically speaking the sporting drive would be "a wild desire to put further boundary stones," to overcome constraints and to surpass the ordinary and the already achieved results. The sport action is for Ortega a superfluous totally free exertion "flowing from the life source" purely for the pleasure of it. Life, too, is a freely chosen "metaphysical effort," spontaneous, aimless, exuberant, free development within the "squandering abundance of inventurous" – and adventurous-opportunities (Ortega y Gasset (1930), 1950, I, p. 132, p. 241, pp. 439ff.). Life is excess energy release, too. Therefore, life for Ortega is not only similar to sport, but it "is" in the last analysis, "in its last root essentially sport and not compulsive necessity" as, for example, to be found in work. He sees a "sportive significance (meaning) of life itself" (1955, p. 18). "Sport(ing) action" is the primary, creative, spontaneous, exuberant, abundant, aimless, initiating, voluntary original activity which makes life worthwhile, which is the real life. Everything else regarding activities is "dull work." Thus, "culture is not the daughter of work, but of sport" and of the sporting drive. According to Ortega, everything "worthwhile on earth is not the product of work, but originates in the spontaneous blossoming and overflowing of futile, uninterested exertion of strength," from the *élan vital* (Ortega y Gasset (1930), 1950, I, p. 203, II, p. 132). Even the state and society were formed by the sport clubs of young adults, for example, at the occasion of kidnapping Sabine girls by the Romans. In short: Sport, for Ortega, is the origin and basis of everything in life which is worthwhile living.

Certainly, this manichaeic dichotomy and single factor theory of productive life results in ideological simplification and exaggeration – with very misleading consequences – and I do not want to criticize all this here in detail as I have done elsewhere (1972, p. 72ff.). The term "sport" is extended toward an all-too-broad meaning first, and then inconsistently identified with modern competitive, institutionalized sport again. Moreover, this analysis is heavily value-laden, emotionally impregnated and by pretending to be a cognitive analysis it provides rough and global ideological justifications of sport. Moreover, Ortega's philosophy is not only too simple; too vitalistic; too biologicistic; too abstract; too exclusive ontologic regarding needs, drives, dispositions, conventions; too little social and socio-cultural; too little anthropological; and too little historical. In addition, it plainly equates creative life and sport, actually subsuming the one under the other. This is certainly wrong, or, at least, vastly exaggerated. Yet, even if we have to reject the overall identification and overgeneralization, as well as the pathetic language of this time, we might find a grain of deep truth in the approach, if we try to reduce pathos and the sweeping universalizations to a one-directional thesis. Life is dynamic (movement, as Plato said). Human life consists mainly of goal-attaining

actions, at least regarding its sense, though not necessarily regarding the majority of time.

Life is creative action, achieving, performance. *Homo creator and homo performer* are necessarily connected with one another. Creative or senseful life is in the last analysis personal achieving activity (at least in the wider sense of the term “achievement”). If creative life in its deepest roots is proper and personal activity and achievement – active sporting activity, then, remains to be a distinct (or even distinguished) element, vehicle and medium of engaged active life in the original sense of *Eigenhandlung* (“proper action”). Thus, sport is active, genuine, and creative life. To state this is by no means trivial in the overwhelming grip of the administrated and codified world we talked about above. Indeed, and again, active sport has remained as genuine action (Murphy) in a world of prevailing institutions and codifications. Thus far, we may follow Ortega’s approach. We cannot, however, accept Ortega’s inverse inference that all life in its deepest sense is sport. This would mean, again, to extend the concept of sport beyond any identifiability and delineation which would not make and confer any sense with the word any longer; and it would turn out to be very misleading. There are, thank God, other realms of creative living and achieving, too!

Also, there is no single-factor theory of life and sport to be held valid. Complex phenomena require intricate and differentiated theories as we saw in connection with philosophical anthropology above.

If life in its deepest sense is genuine, proper and personal activity, the ideas of proper achievement, action and performance attain a specific philosophical and educational significance. These certainly relate to any realm of creative personal activity, sport being only one variant. Art, music, science production, active recreation, action leisure, love – and sport (including nature sport, as e.g. hiking) are but intriguing examples of these realms of creative activity. The communicative and social significance certainly and essentially ties in here. I need not go into details here.

There is still a creative principle of an achievement (so to speak). The whole discussion thus far is explicitly related to the traditional social philosophy and sociology of achievement, the performance principle and the “achieving society.” One cannot only (mis)interpret the total achieving principle in an economical way. This would amount to an economic misunderstanding. I cannot go into details of an anticriticism of the critics of the achieving society here (cf., e.g., Lenk 1972, 1976, 1977, 1979). Beside the economic and the sociological achievement principles there is at least a sociopsychological one, and a sociophilosophical one, too. The sociophilosophical one states that man is (among other necessary traits) the achieving being and that one has to distinguish between freely chosen, self-motivated achievements and only secondarily motivated or even obtruded achievements. Phenomenologically and philosophically speaking, they are very different. It is the former kind of achievement behaviour and motivation which is creative, characteristic for *homo performer* and *homo creator* at the same time. This kind of a social philosophical achievement principle which has still to be elaborated further is far from being outdated or obsolete. This, by the way, is also true for

other variants of the achievement principle even though we do not live in a strict(ly) “achieving society” as McClelland (1961) thought (cf. Lenk 1972, 1976).

Educationally speaking it is necessary to provide plenty of opportunities for creative achieving actions (in the narrower competitive and top level as well as in the wider sense). Every man and woman, in particular every youngster, has a human right to have access to creative activities. Creativity, primary motivation, personal engagement and devotion, a plurality of creative activities in a personal combination (multisidedness) – in short: any opportunity for creative achieving activity has to be provided and fostered by schools, Colleges, universities and sport clubs as well as other institutions and other voluntary organizations. The liberal and democratic state has to underline and support these tendencies and should provide itself such opportunities. It seems necessary, at least in Europe, to develop and foster a new positive culture of creative achievements and of the performance principle!

Achievement, if it is a cultural and a social phenomenon, is not purely a natural entity: It is at the same time a psychophysical, sociocultural and spiritual, even philosophical, topic – even more so, if it is related to symbolic mediating procedures and results. It is a central anthropologic category and vehicle of self-understanding and self-development as well as of social identification and judgment.

To be sure, the human concern for personal acting, for excellence by achieving, is an ideal, a demanding symbol, an expression of man's eternal directedness toward the better. Achieving is neither everything nor the only thing, but without achieving, performing man, *homo performer* and creator, could not make much sense of his life, his higher life aspirations. Culture would not be possible without creative achievements. The cultural being (dependent on culture) is the achieving being. And personal/proper acting (*Eigenhandeln, Eigenleistung*) is important for a creative life. Thus, sport, among other creative activities, may be and should be a genuine vehicle of human creativity – certainly a function Ortega Y Gasset thought of.

I would like to finish by quoting a famous verse by Goethe, the greatest German poet (who, by the way, was a very “sportive” writer, lover and skater, displaying a very vital life-style):

*This is wisdom's last conclusion: only he deserves life as well as freedom who has to conquer, to achieve them every day.*

### References

- Coubertin, P. de: Les “trustées” de l’Idee Olympique, *Revue Olympique* 1908, 109 ff.  
 Flusser, V.: “Die kodifizierte Welt.” *Merkur* 32: 1978, pp. 374–379.  
 Goffman, E.: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: 1959.  
 Huizinga, J.: *Homo ludens*. 1938, Hamburg: 1956.  
 Lenk, H.: *Werte – Ziele – Wirklichkeit der modernen Olympischen Spiele*. Schorndorf: 1964, 1972.

- Lenk, H.: "Authoritarian or Democratic Style of Coaching?" *Gymnasium* II, No. 3, 1965, pp. 16–18 (also in German, French, Spanish, later in Japanese). Reprinted in *FIFA Bulletin* No. 44 (1966).
- Lenk, H.: *Leistungssport – Ideologie oder Mythos?* Stuttgart: 1972, 1974.
- Lenk, H.: *Sozialphilosophie des Leistungshandelns*. Stuttgart: 1976.
- Lenk, H.: *Team Dynamics*. Champaign, III.: 1977.
- Lenk, H.: *Social Philosophy of Athletics*. Champaign, III.: 1979.
- McClelland, D.C.: *The Achieving Society*. Princeton: 1961.
- Ortega y Gasset, J.: "El origen deportivo del estado" (1930). *Obras completas*. Madrid: 1950, I, II.
- Ortega y Gasset, J.: Über des Lebens sportlich-festlichen Sinn. (Speech, Düsseldorf Feb. 6, 1954 at the German Sport Federation, DSB). In: *DSB-Jahrbuch 1955/56*. Frankfurt a.M.: 1955, pp. 9–20.
- Weiss, P.: *Sport – A Philosophic Inquiry*. Carbondale-Edwardsville/London/Amsterdam: 1969.