

1 Introduction: Playing Sport

There's a Nike television commercial that neatly encapsulates the relation between the notion of play and the contemporary cultural field of sport. The setting is a soccer match between the national teams of Brazil and Portugal. As the players walk, side-by-side, through the concrete subterranean passage that leads onto the field, the scene is clearly recognizable as early twenty-first-century sport, characterized by strong capitalist, bureaucratic and media inflections. The sides (selected by managers appointed by the respective national federations) are wearing national colours, with the shirts supplied by multinational sports companies (Brazil, for instance, have signed a long-term contract, and are closely associated, with Nike). Many of the players – Roberto Carlos, the Ronaldos, Figo, Ronaldinho – are instantly recognizable worldwide as players and media stars. They are frequently the subject of news stories about transfer rumours or romances, and appear in advertisements for football boots or upcoming games. Nike's choice of teams reflects those media and business logics: Brazil and Portugal have numerous high profile footballers, and share a tradition of playing and valuing skilful, non-ends-directed football – in contrast to national teams such as Germany, England and even Italy and Argentina, which have usually adopted a more cynical approach. One of the criticisms made of the highly talented Portugese team, for instance, is that they are more interested in playing with the ball than scoring goals; and similarly it was often said of Brazil (until repeated failures at the World Cup in the seventies and eighties caused something of a change of heart and tactics) that they would rather 'play beautifully and lose' than resort to 'ugly' football (playing defensively, systematically fouling the opposition).

The occasion is clearly an important competition match sanctioned by FIFA. The players' faces and bodies show signs of seriousness and tension: they process slowly and deliberately, stare intently ahead, and are too focused to acknowledge the other team. They emerge from the tunnel and

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take the field in a modern stadium (perhaps with a retractable roof) filled with as many as one hundred thousand (the capacity of the stadium having been determined, among other things, by safety regulations and requirements) seated fans who will have paid the equivalent of something in the region of hundreds (legally) and thousands (to scalpers) of US dollars a seat, depending on the importance of the match and the location of the seats. Some of the more desirable seating will be located in corporate boxes owned or rented by large corporations for the entertainment of their business clients, who will be provided with restaurant-quality meals and drinks. The game will be strictly circumscribed regarding temporal, spatial and material characteristics and dimensions. Action will begin, cease and recommence only when the referee blows a whistle, and will take place within a marked space commensurate with FIFA rules regarding the length and breadth of the field and its various components (the dimensions of the penalty area, the height of the goalposts). The game will usually run for ninety minutes (not including time added on for stoppages), even if the result is a foregone conclusion after thirty minutes and supporters of the losing team are leaving in droves. Players must wear appropriate gear: to wear the wrong-coloured shorts, or only one sock, or with writing or other marks on the gear other than those of the official or recognized sponsors or makers, would result in a player being removed (temporarily or otherwise) from the field. And this applies to bodies as well, in the case of, say, an injury that causes bleeding, or of the exposure of a player's buttocks to the crowd to communicate a (presumably very brief) political message.

There will be a strict demarcation between officials and players, and players and spectators. The media may purport to 'take viewers into the middle of the action', but if a spectator somehow climbed over the partition that separated them from the players and evaded the numerous trained security staff and police and ran onto the field, then they'd be chased, apprehended, ejected from the ground and heavily fined. The crowd at the venue will be joined by hundreds of millions of viewers around the world watching and listening to it on live and delayed telecasts, through both terrestrial and satellite media, on television, radio and through the internet. A pre-game show will analyze past results, injuries and the possible influence of the referee on the outcome. Highlights of previous games will be accompanied by a plethora of statistics (team and individual) about passes-per-shot-at-goal, goals-per-game, time-in-possession, tackles, fouls, goals and assists (although this will paltry in comparison to the statistical information provided by networks covering, say, a World Series baseball game). Every significant action (offside decisions, fouls, goals) will be replayed, in slow motion and at ordinary speed and from numerous angles, both on a large screen within the stadium (broken only by sponsorship messages), and to

media viewers; and remote microphones will pick up the noises and words coming from the players and officials. At halftime a panel of experts (made up of past and current players and managers, as well as journalists and media commentators) will analyze incidents, provide opinions about what is happening and why, and predict the outcome. The match receipts will be in the tens of millions of US dollars, but this will be dwarfed by the television and internet rights, and the advertising revenue generated by board space around the ground, or the right to exclusively kit one or both teams. The players will be paid out of this revenue, as will the federations, managers, coaches, physios, doctors, publicists, agents, halftime entertainers, the singer of the respective national anthems, and the referee and linespersons. Once the game has finished, it will continue to be analyzed and to generate income: television networks around the world will show highlights during the sports segment of the evening news; newspapers and magazines will write stories about the game and its dramas, heroes and villains; videos and DVDs of the game will be produced, packaged, advertised and sold. Reputations will be made and lost (with important consequences for salaries, contract extensions and sponsorship revenue), players will be induced to change clubs, and millions of fans will celebrate or drink away or violently manifest their sorrow, depending on the outcome. Politicians will line up to be photographed with the winners, and questions asked in the media and political institutions of the losing country. A government might even fall as a consequence of the result.

Little of this is actually shown in the commercial: most of it is implied through what we see in those opening shots. Sporting advertisements usually mirror or reproduce, in miniature, the field and its practices, values, rules, agents and institutions, with the stars, drama, excitement, crowd and skill of the game condensed into a few visuals. A typical football commercial would show a star like Ronaldo or Beckham on the ball, a scything tackle being skilfully avoided, the winning goal blasted into the back of the net past an acrobatic goalkeeper, the celebrations of the players, the fans shouting and screaming with joy. And the name of the sponsor would be associated with the action, the players and the gear, but also with the passion, excitement and beauty of football.

But this isn't a typical sporting commercial. Let's go back to the scene we were describing: Brazil and Portugal are on their way to take part in an institutionally authorized, important and very serious sporting contest, when the players start behaving as if they were children or teenagers having a kick-about on a Brazilian beach. One player takes possession of the ball and starts playing with it – juggling it, bouncing it off walls, flicking it up into the air. The rest join in, trying to get the ball away from the first player in order to outdo his tricks. The intensity, pace and skill increases as each

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person ups the ante, until the action resembles a pinball game, with the ball flying in all directions. Suddenly the referee appears. He's clearly horrified by what's going on, tackles (actually fouls) the player in possession (the Brazilian Ronaldo) and retrieves the ball. The final scene shows that the order of things has been restored: the dignified-looking referee holds the ball, a national anthem plays, the crowd sings, the cameras pan across the players who are now literally back in line, hands behind their backs. They are blackened, dirty, dishevelled and chastened, but focused and in possession of themselves: playtime is over, and sport takes its place.

To some extent this book reprises this narrative: it's primarily about the development of what we understand as the modern field of sport, and its transformation into a form of popular culture closely tied in with, and in many ways indistinguishable from, the values, logics and discourses associated with bureaucracy, global capitalism, the media and more generally the field of power (Bourdieu 1998). But it's also about the relationship between sport and the disposition to play, and what we might call the meta-narrative of the Nike commercial – which is that even when the field of sport is at its most business-like, trying to exclude the spontaneity and wastefulness associated with playful activity (represented by the figure of the referee restoring the seriousness of sport), simultaneously it has to cover itself by producing performances of its commitment to the idea that, at heart, sport is still just people at play.