

PART II



Popular Culture and Rites of Passage



Chapter Six

Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminoid Leisure?

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Sport is classified by Victor Turner as a liminoid phenomenon, in contrast to a genuinely liminal, or ritual form of cultural performance.¹ Turner names sport in several enumerations of “industrial-liminoid” phenomena, a classification of performative genres that includes the full spectrum of modern art and entertainment.² Not alone among anthropologists in excluding sport from the realm of ritual,³ his exclusion is based on a distinction that becomes unduly arbitrary when analyzed against the phenomenon of modern sport. Indeed, by relying on the very terms he uses to develop his liminal/liminoid distinction, I hope to show that modern sport compares more strongly with Turner’s own conceptualization of genuine liminal performance. While this analysis raises questions about the merits of Turner’s liminal/liminoid distinction, it also suggests a theoretical basis for asserting that sports, as genuinely liminal phenomena, carry into the modern world as powerful, modern ritual phenomena.

LIMINALITY AND THE “WHAT-IF” IN SPORTS

Turner defines liminality as “the state and process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status”⁴ (Turner 1977a: 33). The meaning of this formulation becomes clear within the context of tribal rituals, such as rites of passage in which partici-

pants are temporarily separated from all that identifies and constrains them within a normative reality. Set apart, often with a group of peers, they are stripped of their identity and made to undergo some ordeal or symbolic action, to be later reinstated into society with an altered identity at the ritual's conclusion. In the midst of ritual participation they are neither here nor there, but genuinely in between distinctions, beyond the limits of ordinary social sanctions, and unconcerned with the mundane affairs of everyday life. Temporarily defined by the ritual context, they are beings-in-transition, no longer what they were, nor yet what they will be. Following Arnold van Gennep, Turner uses "liminality" primarily in this very specific sense, referring to the mid-phase of rituals during which participants are in transition from one social status to another (Turner 1982a: 24–25). This phase of ritual is a kind of "temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order that constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos'" (41). Grimes has described this world-within-a-world as "a moment of ritually generated limbo ... an antistructural moment of reversal" (1995: 151). While in this antistructural context, liminars experience the suspension of at least some elements of normative social structure. Roles and rules that normally define acceptable conduct may be suspended or inverted, thus encouraging a range of behavior and expression not fully available within the boundaries that conventionally organize and restrain daily life.

The antistructural suspension of the ordinary establishes a context in which an alternative mode of relation, or *communitas*, emerges among liminars. *Communitas* has been described as "the social anti-structure" (Alexander 1991: 192) because it presents a model of human relatedness other than what routinely prevails, one that contrasts with the mediated, abstract, and ultimately arbitrary nature of social roles and modes of relation established by law, language, and custom. Within Turner's writings, the relationship of antistructure and *communitas* to liminality is complex and multifaceted, and Turner himself has offered no systematic treatment of the interrelationship among these key ideas.⁵ Yet, his claim that the "essence of liminality" is "its release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of ... the meaningfulness of ordinary life" (Turner 1985a: 160), testifies to their significance in his understanding of ritual. As social conventions and identities are pushed into the background, several features appear in the foreground. Foremost is a ludic dimension in which playful experimentation brings variation to old structural themes. The importance of this ludic element leads Turner to describe liminality as "a time outside time in which it is often permitted to *play* with the factors of sociocultural experience, to disengage what is mundanely connected, what, outside liminality, people may even believe to be naturally and intrinsically connected, and to join the

disarticulated parts in novel, even improbable ways” (1985c: 236). Released from the daily formalities that regulate social life, liminality encourages the deconstruction of society’s conventions and structural elements “into cultural units which may then be reconstructed in novel ways” (1985a: 160). The element of play supports the spirit of spontaneity and creativity that brings novelty onto the field of possibility not only as an experiential event for direct participants, but as a reflective event for observers as well. Not only are fundamental features of social structure revealed, but through their recombination new images of self, new expressions of social relationship, even new arrangements of social order, are demonstratively experienced. The ludic is the substantial core of liminality, as Turner clearly asserts. “It is the analysis of culture into factors and their free ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is the essence of liminality, liminality par excellence” (1982a: 28).

If liminality is a primary means by which a society reveals itself to itself, and in so doing not only maintains a capacity to continually rejuvenate itself with new values and new relational patterns but reasserts its allegiance to the old; then a society without liminality lacks a mechanism for the self-reflection and creative self-renewal that Turner identifies as the essence of liminality. Modern industrial societies, as uniquely secular, are often thought empty of ritual, thus empty of genuinely liminal phenomena. But I will argue that contemporary sports present this ludic essence, and thus are modern-day variants of the liminal. I will further argue that there is no need to distinguish liminal and liminoid as Turner does to distinguish modern sport from its ancient variants (indeed, I will cast doubt on the merits of this distinction in general).

It is not simply because sports are structured as games, or that we use a language of play in our reference to them, that I connect sports to Turner’s unique sense of ludic. Rather, it is the open-ended context of sports, and more importantly their double-edged capacity to present ourselves to ourselves in our sheer potentiality while at the same time conserving cherished images of what we are, that draws me in this direction. This element of “what-if” stirs our imaginations and our hopes until the final outcome of a sporting event is determined, and connects us to the reality of our own indeterminacy. The ludic element is indispensable to sport and as aspects of the ludic dimension of modern society, sporting events are critical to the role liminality plays in our collective reflexivity and in supporting a context for metacommunication. Turner speaks of the liminal as “dominated by the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire” (1985d: 295). It “is full of potency and potentiality” (1977a: 33). Stirring a dialectical interplay between actuality and pos-

sibility, liminality makes available new options for experience and relation that are not possible, or desired, within the constraints of established, conventional order. Liberated from behavioral norms and cognitive rules, liminars engage in acts and behaviors that, while neither likely nor specifically intended, are the desired product of the liminal context. Thus liminality becomes a kind of dynamic core within which cultures produce, reproduce, and store possibilities of social action and being.

Turner seems to restrict the concept of liminality to simple, tribal contexts, warning against broader application: "It is within the context of social systems which keep relatively stable the changes and transformation of symbolic systems as in cyclical or repetitive ritual that the term "liminality" properly belongs. When used of processes, phenomena and persons in large-scale complex societies, its use must be in the main metaphorical. ... Failure to distinguish between symbolic systems and genres belonging to cultures which have developed before and after the Industrial Revolution can lead to much confusion both in theoretical treatment and in operational methodology" (1982a: 29–30). Yet much of his most creative work involves extending and transforming the concept of liminality, recognizing, as Grimes describes, that liminality is "a creative font not only for ritual, but for culture in general" (1995: 151). In order to resolve the tension between his assertions that genuine liminality is a feature of ritual, which in turn is a feature of small-scale, tribal societies, and his observation that liminality is a critical component in the creative maintenance and regeneration of culture in general, Turner queries, "If liminality in tribal, traditional ritual is a mode of plural, reflexive, often ludic metacommunication ... we have to ask the question ... what are the functional equivalents of liminality in complex societies" (1985a: 164).⁶

It is within the context of a search for "functional equivalents" of liminality in modern societies that Turner develops the distinction between liminal and liminoid. In general terms, liminoid phenomena have the quality of liminality but are neither ritual *per se* nor a specific phase of ritual. The liminoid, he claims, "*resembles* without being identical with 'liminal'" (1982a: 32). Like liminal-rituals, modern liminoid forms of theater, entertainment, and sport, even forms of expressive art and literature, generate or are generated from a subjunctive mood. They share with ritual the feature of playfulness from which emerge new, expressive possibilities and modes of self-representation. Liminoid phenomena, too, encourage public reflexivity by representing ourselves to ourselves in a context that accommodates critical scrutiny and personal, if not public, renewal. But unlike tribal rituals, liminoid forms are not integrated into the broad weave of a cohesive social tapestry, nor do they blend into a single context a wider range of available performative and expres-

sive media. Rather, they manifest themselves as independent genres, as distinct arts or modes of personal expression, created and chosen by individuals according to taste. Unlike rituals, they are not obligatory but voluntarily chosen, competing with one another alongside other commodities in a market of liminoid choices.

Turner does not completely disassociate the liminal and the liminoid. Yet, while he claims that many modern forms are “historically continuous with ritual (1985c: 237), he hesitates to characterize them as liminal-ritual, stating: “Crucial differences separate the structure, function, style, scope and symbology of the *liminal* in tribal and agrarian ritual and myth from what we may perhaps call the ‘liminoid’, of leisure genres, of symbolic forms and action in complex, industrial society” (1982a: 41). Turner explains the basis for these differences in evolutionary terms, by developing a broader narrative context that accounts for the development of performance genres from sacred, tribal ritual to modern, secular entertainment. Key to the unfolding of this narrative is the concept of “social drama,” which he identifies as the common ancestor of tribal rituals and modern genres of popular entertainment. Viewed as a universal form of cultural experience, social dramas unfold through four successive phases of public action. Turner speculates that many forms of public performances are generated in the redressive phase, or “exploratory heart” of social drama. In this phase “the contents of group experiences (*Erlebnisse*) are replicated, dismembered, remembered, refashioned, and mutely or vocally made meaningful”⁷ (1985d: 298). As one form of redressive action, ritual re-presents the basic elements of the drama, orchestrating them into performances that resonate with the collective experience, values, and cosmological vision of a community. Its repetitive public performance integrates the community by uniting members in common experience, thereby building the basis for communal identity. Making use of the entire spectrum of what Lévi-Strauss has called the “sensory code,” rituals blend multiple layers of symbols that come to elicit a collective response. But in Turner’s story of ritual, the communal identity that was created and sustained by public ritual fractures, and ritual dies as an effective resource for redressive action. As it dies, it “spins off” the separate strands of sensory stimuli that were once integrated into a single, cohesive and culturally meaningful context. He notes, “Often when ritual perishes as a dominant genre, it dies a *multi-para*, giving birth to ritualized progeny, including the many performative arts” (1982b: 79).

The motive force for this death dance is the social structural change brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, industrialization triggers dramatic and irreversible changes in social life. Human self-identity shifts from a communitarian to an individualist paradigm. The “sphere of

religious ritual” contracts. Society fragments into spheres of specialization, organized by the forces of rationalization and bureaucratization. Efficiency and technology provide the frames within which answers to perceived problems are articulated. The communal context capable of supporting broadly shared visions and meanings is fractured, fundamentally altering human social interaction “at the level of expressive culture” (Turner 1982a: 30). Turner explains: “As society increases in scale and complexity, ... these strands of symbolic action are torn from their original connection in ritual and become independent modes of expression” (1985c: 237).

These independent modes of expression are Turner’s “liminoid.” He refers to them as “genres of industrial leisure,” and among them he includes major sporting events. Given their place in modern, complex, industrial, urban life, liminoid genres do not reflect, nor do they connect us with, the rhythms and cycles of life and land. They are not, in Turner’s words, “context-sensitive” (1985c: 243). Rather, they exist and are sustained independently, reflecting personal, sometimes “idiosyncratic” visions and meanings. Nurtured by the spirit of modern industrialization, they exhibit the specialization, rationalization, and increasing technologization characteristic of that social turn. Yet, as descendants of ritual they carry, in their history or in some aspect of their modern practice, a trace of that ritual heritage even as they move further in the direction of autonomy. Thus we see in the forms of many modern sports (as with modern forms of music, pictorial and performance art, literary forms, and decorative arts) a common ritual legacy. That this legacy is overshadowed, however, by their development as autonomous forms of expression seems to be the reason for Turner’s hesitancy to classify modern sports and other liminoid genres of public performance as ritual *per se*. He supports this position by indicating through a series of distinguishing contrasts what he sees as the essential differences between ritual-liminal forms of cultural performance and industrial-liminoid forms of modern entertainment and performance. This basic dichotomy is clarified by reference to another, the “ergic-ludic/anergic-ludic,” which links directly to the evolutionary history of social drama. In what follows I will try to illustrate the specific difficulties sport poses for both facets of Turner’s liminal/liminoid distinction.

In several places Turner enumerates essentially the same series of contrasting features to differentiate liminal and liminoid genres of performance.

Liminoid genres ... contrast with liminal phenomena in the following ways. Liminal phenomena tend to dominate in tribal and early agrarian societies; they are collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles; they are integrated into the total social process; they reflect the collective

experience of a community over time; and they may be said to be “functional” or “eufunctional” Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, flourish in societies of more complex structure. . . . They are not cyclical but intermittent, generated often in times and places assigned to the leisure sphere. . . . [They] tend to develop apart from central political and economic processes, along the margins, in the interstices, on the interfaces of central and servicing institutions—they are plural, fragmentary . . . and often experimental in character (1977b 50–51; see also 1982a: 52–55, 1977a: 50–51).

First, and perhaps most strongly, he distinguishes liminal and liminoid forms of cultural performance on the basis of the type of social structure in which they are found. This contrast reflects the broader narrative relied upon to explain the diversity within the many forms of social drama. However, with regard to sport, this narrative explains little, for sports are found virtually in every culture in some form, and in many cases the practice of particular forms has changed little over time. This fact is acknowledged by many anthropologists who nonetheless argue that ancient and modern sports are clearly distinguishable. The typical line of argument is that ancient sports were highly ritualized phenomena, experienced and interpreted within a broader religious context, while modern sports, despite their historical continuity with ancient forms, are merely very popular but highly secular forms of public entertainment. Turner seems to accept this view. Modern sports are not instances of ritual because they are leisure phenomena, and leisure is a feature of postindustrial, secular societies, which are incapable of supporting a context sufficient to sustain the shared beliefs and visions that would link sports to a transcendent reality, and thus maintain them as ritual phenomena. This explanation, however, begs the question, for it defines the entire category of liminal-ritual phenomena in terms of its embeddedness in the religious practices of ancient, simple societies, thus denying at the outset the possibility of a modern secular ritual supported by a broad-based community.

I would argue that the relationship between ancient and modern sports is not clarified by the ritual-secular distinction (assuming the legitimacy of the distinction). One can concede that modern sports are secular phenomena, clearly separated from modern religious institutions, that they are driven by contemporary commercialization, and that increasingly they incorporate the innovations of modern technology. But we cannot distinguish ancient sports from modern sports on these premises. Ancient sports were equally exploited and supported by the commercial element of the societies in which they were embedded. They, too, took advantage of the technological achievements of the day. Secularization is a feature of modern culture (even modern religion has to some degree been secularized) and may have

diluted some of the richness of a once-integrated ritual context, but it has not necessarily compromised the essence of ritual liminality, which I argue remains at the core of the contemporary sports.

SPORT AT THE CENTER OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Sports pose different difficulties for Turner's liminal/liminoid distinction when we consider them in light of his view that, while liminoid phenomena appeal to individuals or small sets of individuals, liminal genres reflect "the collective experience of a community over time." This contrast has significant meaning for Turner because it speaks to the heart of the fundamental change in "expressive culture," which he sees as the result of moving from small-scale, tribal societies that focus upon the community, to large-scale, industrial societies that emphasize the individual. This change is reflected in the respective symbolologies to be found in liminal and liminoid forms. Symbols characteristic of liminal phenomena "tend to have a common intellectual and emotional meaning for the members of the widest effective community" (Turner 1977a: 45) and are closer to what Turner calls the "objective-social" typological pole (Turner 1982a: 54, 1977a: 51). The symbols we find in liminoid genres reflect the individualistic character of the phenomena in general and tend to be "more idiosyncratic and quirky" (Turner 1977a: 51, 1977b: 45). They do not emerge from the collective, nor do they necessarily express the collective experiences of the community. Rather, because they are created "by named individuals," the symbols associated with these liminoid forms reflect a more "personal-psychological" range of meaning that is relevant specifically, although not uniquely, to the particular individuals who create them (1982a: 54, 1977a: 51). By contrast, genuine ritual is a collective effort identifiable by a tightly orchestrated context that unites many different genres of performance into a single cohesive whole. Its symbolology reflects the psyche of the community and is accessible to the whole. Furthermore, while change is a feature of ritual, at least superficially one notices first its sameness and the redundancy of its form. Liminoid genres, on the other hand, are recognizable as distinct and autonomous forms of expression or entertainment, existing independently and without any necessary reference to one another, expressing the individual effort and diversity of their creators. As such they are "plural, fragmentary, and experimental" (Turner 1977b: 43), generating a wide range of forms.

Certainly modern sport presents itself through a wide plurality of forms, each autonomous in its constitution by a unique set of rules and its development apart from other forms; but there are at least three distinctly different

senses in which sport can be described as “collective.” First, unlike other liminoid forms, such as modern painting or poetry, in which a unique product is created by a named individual, sports, like ritual, emerge from the collective. Evidence of this is found in sports history, which finds its first expression mutely in prehistoric art and artifact, and later in myths of heros and gods. The Olympic Games is only one example whose legacy is rooted in such ancient stories. Japan’s national sport, *Ozumo*, is another (Cuyler 1979: 22). One can only speculate on the specific origins of sports such as wrestling and racing, forms so ancient and universal they seem to point beyond culture to something primal and commonly human. Only rarely can one attribute the origin or invention of a particular sports event to an individual. Even when one considers the origins of distinctly modern sports, one hears stories more remarkable for their mythic color than their historical accuracy. The widely accepted story of the invention of modern baseball by Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839, for example, is acknowledged to be a myth (Zeigler 1979: 183). Even basketball, which fits Turner’s liminoid model inasmuch as it was the singular invention of one, known and named individual, is understood more significantly through stories of the heroic efforts of its legendary players. James Naismith is incidental compared to the mythic feats of players kept alive in the Basketball Hall of Fame. Like other sports shrines, this place tells the sport’s sacred history through the concrete (and often miraculous) deeds of players who, though certainly known and named individuals, are more recognizable as “The Stilt,” “The Pearl,” “Magic,” or “Air.” We do not remember and do not really care about their individuality, if we understand individuality in terms of personal history. That individuality is effaced by the records that make players immortals of the game. Our experience of the athlete as athlete is not an experience of an individual but of a symbol, an emblem. In frozen images of peak performances, and in the endless litany of their records, athletes themselves become larger-than-life symbols that gain their life, meaning, and significance from the imagination and aspirations of the collective.⁸

Secondly, sport forms reflect and symbolize the collective spirit of the group from which they arise, as *Ozumo*, for example, carries forward the values, traditions, and cultural spirit of Japan. Japan’s *sumotori* (wrestlers) are living emblems, embodiments of this spirit. The forms and rules of this manner of wrestling reflect cultural values and attitudes with which an entire people identify. They represent the self-projected image of the collective as it sees itself in competitive struggle. This is equally true of the national sports and the major sports figures of many countries: the distance runners of Kenya, the gymnasts of Russia, the weight-lifters of Eastern Europe, or ball players of the United States. These examples testify to the fact that large

collectives of people identify, and come to be identified, with particular athletes and athletic events.⁹

A third sense in which modern sports can be described as collective is found in the fact that sports draw the collective to them, where the collective is understood to be an entire community, or an otherwise significant portion of the community. Homecoming games, for example, in small communities across America are collective events, engaging the entire community. Attendance is a community expectation and at least a significant majority, if not the whole, celebrates in and deeply identifies with the anticipated victory or a consequent loss. This sort of collective response is replicated in ever-widening communities, culminating in the Olympic Games, an event that anthropologist James Peacock has labeled “a global ritual” (1985: 81). The sheer number of athletes, officials, and fans alone illustrates the capacity of sports to focus the collective attention and identification of a significant portion of humanity toward a singular public performance. Like the tribal rituals Turner describes, these modern sports are occasions for public reflexivity and metacommunication. Athletes serve as symbolic representations of ourselves. Through their efforts we witness ourselves in defeat and in sublime transcendence. But sports do not merely represent; they also transform. Sports construct a context in which we, as humans, in fact, transform ourselves; creating ourselves anew with each record; extending our potential as we establish new limits to our present being. When records are set human horizons are literally redefined. As the frame for such defining experiences, modern sport bears a transcendent quality as capable as any tribal ritual of representing the collective experiences, aspirations, values, and limitations of our human beingness, and as able to transform the limits of our being within a structured, organized context.

Sport fits Turner’s description of the liminal most clearly when one considers that, while new forms of sport continue to be produced and sports are available for continuous consumption, they are indeed seasonal phenomena. Like liminal rituals, individual sports have a feature of sameness. They are redundant, tend to be cyclical, and often follow, if not biological or social-structural rhythms, certainly meteorological rhythms. Preseason preparation augurs the coming of the next season, and big matches are seasonally defining events. Even as commercial influences have led to the virtually ubiquitous presentation of sporting events, major sports are still identified with, and experienced in terms of, a particular season. Baseball is summer; football is autumn. Lesser sports, such as swimming, track and field, gymnastics, even surfing, have competitive seasons and reflect the cyclical character of liminal phenomena more than the intermittent and continuous generation of liminoid phenomena.

To the extent that our lives are ordered by the rhythms of sports seasons, the centrality of sports in our total social life follows somewhat from this seasonal character. But sports are “integrated into the total social process” in other subtle, and not-so-subtle, respects. To the extent, for example, that our choices and perceptions of what exists in the commercial market are enhanced by appeal to various sports and sporting figures, free market choices—the bedrock of our culture—are influenced by sport. As a significant factor in modern leisure, the degree to which sports structure our time increases as leisure time increases. Even more subtle and, some would argue, more significantly, the influence of sport is reflected in our politics and beyond—in the idioms of our language. As one of the “most ubiquitous activities of modern contemporary society,” sport “penetrates into and plays a significant role in all of the social institutions” (Sage 1979: 1). Thus, while Turner’s assessment of sport as liminoid may be true with respect to the fact that sports “tend to develop apart from central political and economic processes, along the margins,” as a total phenomenon, sport cannot be accurately characterized as “marginal, fragmentary,” or “outside the central economic and political processes” as Turner claims of liminoid phenomena in general.

The integrative importance of sport can most easily be argued from the fact that sports serve as primary social structuring events for individuals as well as for groups, drawing the entire community together in heightened appreciation of and identification with their community. Sociologist George Sage notes that “sport and education are inexorably intertwined in American society” (5). Indeed, our educational lives are structured around sports. Sports link health and moral education with recreative leisure. Beginning with organized recess and physical education classes, and continuing in extracurricular activities from grade school through college, not only do sports channel the energy of those who participate directly, they channel their identity, reputations, and in some cases, the course of entire lives. To the larger community, a school’s team sports provide a focus for collective identity. In urban communities, while the singular power of a sporting season may have less structuring force in the life of the community as a whole, should the city’s team make the final round of a playoff tournament, and better still, win a championship, the mood and rhythms of that community are dramatically affected. Whether or not one’s own personal life is structured around sports, the general pattern of modern life is affected by the impact and influence of sport; in its mood, its rhythms, its energy, and its identity.

Much of this impact is reflected in the world of business and economics. “Although exact numbers of sports related jobs are difficult to calculate, estimates are as high as 5 million” (Stedman, Delpy and Goldblatt 2001: 4). This is in the US alone, where the sports industry has been ranked as high as

eleventh based on estimates of total consumption and investments (Mullin, Hardy and Sutton 2000: 3). These facts make it easy to claim that sport is a business, but it is equally true that business is a parasite upon sport. The combined forces of globalization and technological innovation are expected to increase the consumer base for sports, and companies are poised to take advantage of fans who become sports participants through their consumption of products and services. The International Olympic Committee projects the value of television rights for the 2008 Olympic Games to increase four times over what it was just twenty years ago, and a similar rate of increase is predicted for the 2006 World Cup (Westerbeek and Smith 2003: 91). Television simply opens up the frame that was once limited by stadium walls, making it possible for more fans to experience a sports event. Thus, despite the fact that many decisions affecting sports are made in business offices and have financial implications, business is a driving force in sport precisely due to sport's capacity to sustain human interest.

The power of sports to peak and sustain our attention and carry our imaginations is the core of the centuries-old linkage between sports and politics, a link that reveals some of our more contradictory, if not paradoxical beliefs about sports. On the one hand, our collective imaginations hold a vision of athletic purity, of pristine competition among skilled and noble athletes capable of bringing warring factions to peaceful truce. The reality, however, for ancient sport as well as contemporary contests, is that sports are linked to politics and economics as much as they are to mythic images. Images of battling athletes have always served the purposes of politics. In our own time, both domestically and internationally, sports provide a background against which political battles have been waged. We need think back no further than the long Olympic cold war, which for over thirty years functioned as a thin metaphor for the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union to demonstrate their respective ideological superiority. "Wherever one looks, sports serve as a tool of politics in one form or another—as a means of diplomatic recognition or isolation, as a vehicle of protest and propaganda, as a catalyst of conflict, as a way to gain prestige or further international cooperation, as a vehicle of international social control, as a stimulus to modernization, and unification. The list of examples are endless" (Strenk 1979: 129).¹⁰

Sports do indeed mirror the dynamics of social-political process, but they infiltrate and direct our consciousness of those processes through language. Thirty years ago Ike Balbus drew attention to "[t]he ubiquity of the sports metaphor" and argued that "the increasingly frequent application of sports language to the sphere of state activity both signals and helps promote the internalization of [a new] ideology" (1975: 30). The particulars of

such a change are not as important for our purpose here as is Balbus's observation that through the metaphors drawn from it, sport functions to mediate change in the fundamental structures and norms of our political life. Richard Lipsky offers a similar argument in *How We Play the Game*: "The strength of sports language and drama demonstrates how the symbolic world of sports provides for an emotional network in American society that forms an important foundation for political stability. The power of sports language, as an agent of sports symbolism, forms a network of national and social communication that provides large masses of Americans with communal warmth and personal identity" (1981: 41). These writers note a distinctive relationship between sport and the broader social context mediated by language. The use of sports metaphors to describe political or other social realities feeds back into these realities as they are cast in terms of the metaphors used to describe them. From different perspectives Balbus and Lipsky observe not only that social reality is mediated by the metaphors of sport, but that at some point the differentiation between reality and metaphor begins to blur, confounding the two. This mediating power of sport relates directly to what Turner refers to as the "eufunctional" aspect of genuinely liminal genres. Serving the positive function of maintaining structure in society, this feature is absent in modern liminoid genres. In Turner's view these later genres do have a purpose beyond entertainment and personal expression, functioning "as an independent and critical source" (1982a: 33). Turner is obviously thinking of modern genres of literature or art, and speculative philosophy,¹¹ when he explains that liminoid phenomena "are often parts of social critiques or revolutionary manifestos" (ibid.: 54–55). Yet, unlike art or literature, sport rarely moves explicitly in this direction. Indeed, there are examples, such as the political acts of protest displayed by individual African-American athletes during the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, or by gymnast Vera Caslavskva in protest of the Soviet invasion of her country that same year, but sports rarely serve as platforms for explicit social critique, and still less for revolutionary pronouncements. More often they are associated with a conservative nationalism or with traditional social and cultural values.

The relationship between sport and society is indeed multifaceted and no doubt complex. Commonly sports are thought to reflect, conserve, and further the values of the prevailing culture. But sports function more integrally in developing the values that guide societies and move them through fundamental changes. British sociologist John Hargreaves has noted, for example, that in the mid nineteenth century, "athleticist discourse/practice was absolutely crucial in the formation of the dominant class in Britain" (1987: 143). In the same vein, Jim Riordan has argued that one of the compelling reasons for the establishment of the elaborate Soviet sports system was a rec-

ognition that sport was “an eminently appropriate device to achieve certain key aims associated with the establishment and maintenance of a new social order” (1987: 391). In *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul links modern sports with industrialization, viewing them as “an extension of the technical spirit” (1964: 384). But he argues further, claiming that: “In sport the citizen of the technical society finds the same spirit, criteria, morality, actions, and objectives—in short—all the technical laws and customs—which he encounters in the office or factory” (ibid.: 384). While this observation forms the basis of a largely negative appraisal of modern sport, Ellul’s observations, along with those of other sociologists, illustrate Turner’s claims regarding the role liminality plays in “furthering the purposes of the existing social order.” In this respect sport is more illustrative of what Turner refers to as the “eufunctional” aspect of liminal phenomena than it is of the critical pronouncements articulated by individuals in literature, art, political theory, or the myriad forms of industrial-liminoid expression. As a form of cultural performance, the relationship of sports to everyday sociocultural processes is not exclusively unidirectional, simply expressing, reflecting, or preserving the central relationships and values of the system at large. Rather, it is what Turner calls “reciprocal and reflexive.” Thus in the dialectical interplay that comes alive through public performance, sports not only reflect and conserve larger social values but also invert them, creating values as they abrogate those that prevail, furthering the values and structures that exist as they replenish or redefine them, drawing from a “fructile storehouse of possibility.”

In considering Turner’s characterization of sports as liminoid, I have contested the claim that sports are “marginal, fragmentary, outside the central economic and political processes,” arguing instead that they are an integrated, interdependent facet of social life; that they dynamically reflect, absorb, give back, alter, and help move social processes onward. I have argued that they derive from and appeal to the collective, that they draw the collective to a common appreciation of an emblematic presentation of itself. Thus, at least in terms of the specific contrasts used by Turner to distinguish the liminoid from the liminal, I find that sports align more strongly with liminal phenomena. However, before rejecting Turner’s inclusion of sports within the category of the industrial-liminoid, there is another facet of his analysis that we ought to consider.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN WORK AND PLAY

In his attempt to further clarify the liminal-liminoid distinction Turner invokes again the broad narrative context he has relied upon to explain the

evolution of major genres of cultural performance. The key concepts to which he draws our attention in this context are those of work, play, and leisure (1982a: 30). Turner observes that in large-scale modern industrial societies, where ritual is absent, one finds a clear division between the realms of work and play, work and leisure (*ibid.*: 35). Work, defined by effort, discipline, serious endeavor, and duty, is a matter of social obligation to which we are contractually bound. Through work one assumes a formal social role and contributes to the maintenance of society through labor. Leisure, on the other hand, is a realm defined by personal pleasure and free choice. It is separated from work life in place and time. It is not under the control and demands of socially dictated rules, routines, and responsibilities; rather, our actions in the realm of leisure reflect personal taste and choice. In leisure we explore, experiment, create, and indulge our tastes through individually chosen modes of play and relaxation. Thus, work and leisure are thought to be mutually exclusive, separate realms, dominated by different goals, values, and attitudes. In Turner's analysis, one does not integrate the activities, attitudes and energies appropriate to one arena into those of the other.

Leisure, as a time apart during which we refresh and rejuvenate ourselves as individuals, is a unique feature of modern life. Turner follows the analysis of Joffe Dumazedier to argue that leisure evolves only when "society ceases to govern its activities by means of common ritual obligations" and the means of livelihood are separated from other activities (36). Only in industrialized societies, where work life is organized in a rational, bureaucratized, technologized manner and individual leisure can be separated as a distinctly "other" realm of activity, given over to the free choice of the individual, has leisure had an opportunity to emerge. While it is one of the salient features of modern life, this sharp contrast between work and leisure or play is not found by Turner in smaller-scale, tribal societies where "ritual is the nerve center of cultural sensitivity" (1977b: 40). In such societies ritual blends the serious work of carrying out social obligation and maintaining vital social structures with a ludic dimension that brings forward the novelty, recreation, delight, and spontaneity modern Western societies have relegated to leisure. This contrast in the way societies relate work and play is captured by Turner in his distinction between "ergic-ludic" and "anergic-ludic" forms of liminality. The dichotomy has been called "a 'watershed' division in his theoretical treatment of the liminal 'play' manifest within ritual proper, as distinct from the 'liminoid' forms of liminality found in leisure activities or entertainment" (Alexander 1991: 46). As with the work-play dichotomy, Turner links the "ergic-ludic" with genuinely liminal forms of tribal ritual, and the "anergic-ludic" with the liminoid forms of modern leisure and expression. This distinction gives a fuller and historically more

concrete answer to the question, “Whatever happened to liminality, as societies increased in scale and complexity?” He answers: “With deliminalization seems to have gone the powerful *play* component. . . . Traditional religions, their rituals denuded of much of their former symbolic wealth and meaning, hence their transformative capacity, persist in the leisure sphere, but have not adapted well to modernity” (1982b: 85–86). It is a salient feature of modern, secularized society that the consecrated context that once supported ritual’s centralizing importance fragments and the many performative elements utilized in that context are marginalized, pushed into the newly emergent realm of leisure. In leisure, liminality and its transformative potential remain available as a matter of personal, individual choice, but they are no longer centralizing and vital forces of community.

As one among a multitude of leisure choices, sports should, according to Turner’s analysis, reflect the values of leisure over those of work. Yet, I would suggest modern sports maintain the symbolic wealth and meaning that supports a transformative capacity.¹² Moreover, sports easily illustrate the blend of work and play that Turner finds so characteristic of ergic-ludic phenomena. It is not among professional sports alone that we are able to find a demonstration of the tension between the categories of work and play, conspicuous enough to collapse the distinction by which Turner defines modern leisure. Indeed, the professional athlete’s work is predicated upon play, but it is equally true that many so-called leisure athletes work seriously at their play. Professional athletes combine a sense of contractual obligation and professional preparation with a spirit of fun and relaxation that draws forward the spontaneity, creativity, and joy that make them entertaining and exciting to watch. This fact is most clearly illustrated by an athlete of the caliber of Michael Jordan, who when playing his best is fulfilling to the fullest his contractual obligations while at the same time exhibiting creativity and enjoyment in the play of the game. The paradox, and the charm, of such a livelihood are often noted in the remarkable fact that grown men are paid so richly to “play a game.”

From the side of leisure a similar paradox is apparent. Many serious “weekend athletes” bring to their leisure pursuit of sport a kind of intensity of purpose, competition and goal orientation more expected in the domain of work. They do indeed, in some sense, “choose” sport, but this voluntary aspect is submerged under the serious effort of disciplined competition and the drive to compete well. Thus, I must disagree with Turner’s observation that “even when there is effort as in competitive sport, that effort—and the discipline of training—is chosen voluntarily, in the expectation of an enjoyment that is disinterested, unmotivated by gain, and has no utilitarian or ideological purpose . . . this is ideally the spirit of leisure” (1982a: 37). Chosen

it may be, but not necessarily in the expectation of disinterested enjoyment, and certainly not without utilitarian purpose (granted that purposes may be individually defined, as purposes and interests generally are in modern life). It is not uncommon to see individuals investing, in their so-called leisure pursuit of sports, a degree of time and effort, and a sense of identity and purpose, that one would expect of professional pursuits. This ambiguity has been noted by sociologists and sports psychologists. Sage claims with respect to sports that “involvement, either as a participant or in more indirect ways, is almost considered a public duty” (1979: 1). Lewis Mumford states the case more strongly, arguing that sport “has become one of the mass duties of the machine age” (1973: 65). Not only do we find that the characteristics of play, enjoyment, and disinterestedness that Turner argues properly define leisure, or anergic-ludic pursuits; we also find it is not so easy as it appears to separate the playing of sports from the social obligation to participate, to distinguish the choice of the individual from the push and pull of larger, unarticulated collective aims. This tension between choice and duty is most apparent in the lives of young boys for whom sports participation (at least in many parts of the United States) does not seem to be entirely optional. Minimally it seems that public pressure directs them to prove at the very least their lack of suitability for sports.

Noting the confusion generated by “functional ambiguities” in modern life, sport psychologist Arnold Beisser suggests sports serve a function analogous to tribal rites of passage, as “a useful bridge in [the] individual transition from boy to man” (1967: 37). His further observation that “sports have become a transitional institution, neither work nor play, but somewhere in between” (*ibid.*: 232) is strikingly reminiscent of Turner’s characterization of liminality as a threshold phenomenon that is essentially “betwixt and between.” Yet, if Turner’s inclusion of sport among the liminoid is accurate, then as “successor of the liminal in complex large-scale societies, where individuality and optation ... have in theory supplanted collective and obligatory ritual performance” (1987: 29), sport ought to reflect the free choice of the individual. Furthermore, as an example of “anergic-ludic” phenomena, it ought to reflect the disinterested lack of utilitarian or ideological purpose properly reflective of the spirit of leisure, as Turner sees it. But as a phenomenon, sport does not live up to the expectations of this analysis. Whether considered within the frames of leisure or professional work life, whether reflecting the perspective of the fan or the performer, sport exemplifies, perhaps more clearly than any other modern performative genre, the sort of dynamic that Turner characterizes by the term “anergic-ludic.” For sports blend work into play and play into work in a manner that renders it difficult to see where the two can be separated. Against these observations we can

thus see a weakness in the explanatory power of his ergic-ludic/anergic-ludic dichotomy.

RETHINKING SPORT AS RITUAL

I have tried to show that, given the profile Turner has relied upon to differentiate liminoid from liminal genres of performance, and given the overall profile of sport as an example of contemporary cultural performance, modern sports more easily align with Turner's model of "genuinely liminal" performance. Given the wide variation of modern sports, I do not discount the potential for seeing liminoid qualities in specific presentations. A pickup game of basketball, for example, is more genuinely recreational, more akin to what Turner sees as anergic-ludic. I am, however, hesitant to ascribe genuine liminality exclusively to major professional events, such as a Superbowl or other events of similar caliber, because while the complete context may not display the cohesive integration we see in larger events, even on a smaller scale sporting events organize, integrate, obligate, and re-create in ways that serve the eufunctional needs of communities and the transformative needs of individuals.

The consequences of my analysis open up two different directions requiring further research and development. On the one hand, modern sport presents a clear case from which to critique Turner's liminal/liminoid distinction, challenging it as arbitrary and raising questions about its ultimate, analytic value. Turner himself hints at the arbitrariness of the distinction when he remarks that "in fact, all performative genres demand an audience even as they abandon a congregation. Most of them, too, incarnate their plots or scores in the synchronized actions of players. *It is only formally that these aesthetic progeny of ritual may be described as individual creations.* Even such forms as the novel involve a publishing process and a reading process, both of which have collective and initiatory features" (1985a: 166, emphasis added). This hint that perhaps in some important way the collective force that underpins the grand works of ritual operates in modern liminoid forms of art, entertainment, and self-expression encourages a closer analysis of the substance of Turner's liminal/liminoid distinction.

The second direction is more pertinent to my own concerns regarding the nature of modern sports. If sports do not fit neatly into Turner's category of the liminoid, whether or not that category holds up under further scrutiny, the question arises: Can modern sports be categorized among modern rituals? While the association of sport and ritual has been casually addressed in popular sports lore as well as by a number of anthropologists,

sociologists, and sports theorists, a positive answer grounded in a coherent theory of ritual has not yet been fully developed. A full theoretical account of sports as ritual requires a coherent theory of ritual and a comparative analysis of modern sports within the frame of such a theory. While I am critical of his liminal/liminoid distinction, I do believe that Turner's broader analysis of liminal-ritual, with its rich conceptual apparatus of antistructure, *communitas*, and liminality, offers solid theoretical ground for not only assessing the relationship between sport and ritual affirmatively, but for seeing the phenomenon of sport as a dynamic, creative, and transformative force in our social life. Such a project would require a closer look at the capacity of modern sports to effect substantive changes that directly impact social and moral order. It is my hypothesis that modern sports can show these characteristics, and it is toward this demonstration that I hope to direct further inquiries.

NOTES

1. This article is reprinted, with updates and revisions, from the *Journal of Ritual Studies* 12, no. 1, 1998 by permission from the journal's editors.
2. See "Images of Anti-temporality" (Turner 1985c). Here Turner lists "folk and high cultural theater, musical composition; epic, ballad, and the novel; painting, sculpture, architecture; genres of dance, including ballet and morris-dancing; opera; *sports and athletics*, stemming from sacred ballgames and funeral games, games of chance devolving from divination; miming, clowning, circus performance in general; tumbling and juggling; postmodern experimental theater, and the various electronic genres, film, television, and rock concerts" (1985c: 237). Later, "Such genres of industrial leisure would include theater, ballet, opera, film, the novel, printed poetry, the art exhibition, classical music, rock music, carnivals, processions, folk drama, *major sporting events* and dozens more" (ibid.: 243, my emphasis). This same list is repeated in Guttman (1978: 55). See also Turner (1977b: 43).
3. For explicit argument against the proposition that modern sport and athletic events are rituals see Guttman (1978), and Gluckman and Gluckman (1977).
4. Turner does not explicate his theory of liminality in any single work. Rather, he develops it in several books and articles published throughout his career. My interpretation of his view in this paper derives primarily from a study of several of his works, most importantly *The Ritual Process* (1969), *From Ritual to Theater* (1982), and the essays contained in the collections *On the Edge of the Bush* (1985) and *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987). I have also benefited from other articles by Turner and from the critical commentary of other scholars.
5. I am not, in my own mind, clear on the interplay among liminality, *communitas*, and antistructure. In *From Ritual* Turner speaks of *communitas* as "the other

major variable of the ‘antistructural’” (1982a: 45). In some places Turner speaks of “anti-structure” as a qualification of liminality and *communitas* (ibid.: 44). In other places he argues as if antistructure is a condition for the appearance of *communitas* and liminality. Whatever their specific relationship, the conceptual triad of *communitas*, liminality, and antistructure seems to refer back and forth to one another, on the one hand, and to a dialectical relationship with social structures and conventionally accepted modes of relation, on the other.

6. Turner does not assert that the genuinely liminal, or the liminal ritual has no place in modern, complex societies. But he limits its presence, saying, “In modern, complex societies both types coexist in a sort of cultural pluralism. But the liminal—found in the activities of churches, sects and movements, in the initiation rites of clubs, fraternities, masonic orders, and other secret societies, etc.—is no longer world-wide” (1969: 55). Turner admits his work in this area is “exploratory” and states: “I hope to make more precise these crude, almost medieval maps I have been unrolling of the obscure liminal and liminoid regions ...” (ibid.: 55). Yet his published work leaves his ideas in this area largely as they were first presented.
7. Turner sees “social drama” as a subcategory of Dilthey’s *Erlebnisse*, understood as unique structures of experience, or in Dilthey’s words, “what in the stream of life forms a unity in the present because it has unitary meaning” (quoted in 1985b: 214). Further explicating Dilthey’s view he describes “lived experience” as “a many-faceted yet coherent system dependent on the interaction and interpenetration of cognition, affects, and volition. It is made up of not only our observations and reactions, but also the cumulative wisdom ... of humankind, expressed not only in custom and tradition but also in great works of art” (1987: 84).
8. See Peacock: “Ritual has been called ‘a machine for stopping time,’ because it repeats, monumentalizes, freezes, and, in some sense, counteracts the passing of time as experienced in life histories and social histories” (1985: 81). One cannot help but notice that every sports Hall of Fame is about freezing moments of victory, of agony, of spectacular achievement, of grace and character, and presenting them *writ large* as emblems of human achievement.
9. See Andrews (1991) and Rinehart (1996). This identity cuts in the other direction as well. As Rinehart points out, the athletes themselves often experience a need to vindicate not just themselves but the “ideology of their country.”
10. See also Houlihan (1994), whose analysis illustrates the role of sport in the process of globalization.
11. He mentions specifically the “liminoid” works of Marx, and “experimental and theoretical science,” and refers to “‘liminoid’ settings,” among which he includes “universities, institutes, colleges, etc.” as places “for freewheeling, experimental cognitive behavior as well as forms of symbolic action” (1982a: 33). Comments such as these make me think that Turner paints with the liminoid brush perhaps too broadly, moving himself in the direction of identifying “liminoid” with any and all creative or playful activity.

12. I recognize that to establish modern sport as ritual in Turner's sense of that term, I would want to consider the internal organization of modern sports, their specific symbologies, and transformative capacity. This is a project for another time.

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