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Book Review: Fair Play: The Ethics of Sports

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Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport, 3rd ed.

Robert L. Simon

Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2010, xii + 244 pp., \$33.00 pbk., 978-0-8133-4368-6

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During the past few years of my collegiate and youth-club coaching career, I have often found myself engrossed with many intellectual tasks in an attempt to improve both myself and my athletes' chances for success. Moral reasoning is, quite frankly, usually at the back of my mind, and only seems to come forth after some ethical problem arises that affects our team. Perhaps one reason for this neglectful behavior is that in contemplating the right course of action to take, I have often picked up books on sport ethics and frowned with dismay as its contents lay embedded in a vacuous world of language and idealism. Robert Simon's *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport* is a breath of fresh air to anyone like myself who may be looking for a way to understand the ethical complexity embedded within sport so that informed decisions and commitments to reasonable, not to mention ethical courses of action can be made.

The third edition of Simon's *Fair Play* contains material not only relevant to the sports practitioner who works in an administrative or leadership position, but also to the amateur, collegiate, or professional athlete, as well as the fans that inhabit the economic and socio-psychological world of athletic competition. Simon's previous editions of the text were aptly suited for their time, and the present one is no different. Readers both familiar and unfamiliar with previous editions of *Fair Play* will be encouraged to reflect on important ethical issues within sport, such as: the manufacture and supplemental use of performance-enhancing aids, the application of technology to craft "faster" footwear and "lighter" apparel, the psychological ramification of aggressive versus competitive behavior, the sociology behind the role that athletics plays in academia, and the socio-economic impact of commercialization on human beings when professional athletes receive obscene wages.

The introduction to *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport* addresses the role that moral reasoning can play in sport and why it is important to refrain from

being sucked into the contemporary habit of succumbing to a relativistic worldview. Relativism—the view that truth is context, time, and culture-dependent—threatens sincere philosophical and by all means practical attempts to understand and reason about ethical issues within sport by denying that truth can be discovered or that correct courses of action can be taken, regardless of the situation or context. Simon’s critique of relativism does not end with a view to abolish relativism in the face of some crude absolutism, but rather that we should be open to critique any of our basic beliefs that we hold about phenomena in sport and ethics, without becoming painstakingly skeptical. Since sports play a central role in today’s world, but seems to be rife with ethical quandaries, it is vital that we identify and develop positions that ground our beliefs and actions in reason for the purposes of behaving in morally justifiable ways.

To understand the relationship between sports and ethical reasoning, Simon addresses several themes that concern sports-practioners, participants, and enthusiasts. The role of competition is a central theme in the book and especially the first few chapters. In chapter 2, “Competition in Athletics: Is it Morally Defensible?,” Simon proceeds to discuss why and how we engage in competition with each other and amongst ourselves, and how the consequences of such behavior can be very rewarding for self-development of personhood in the pursuit of excellence—as for example, developing desirable character traits—or can result in the exploitation of rules when the only pursuit is to win. What makes for good sportsmanship and fair play is crucial to Simon’s argument, and in chapter 3 (“Sportsmanship, Fairness, and Competition in Sport”) he attempts to develop a “defensible sport ethic, one that respects participants as persons, [which] should avoid the twin errors of, on the one hand, leaving no room for such tactics as the strategic foul, or on the other hand, assuming that any behavior that contributes to victory is morally acceptable” (69).

The narrow-minded focus on winning manifests itself when athletes are tempted to indulge in consuming steroids for performance-enhancement, as well as when coaches are sucked into the belief, and consequent partial treatment of athletes on the basis of their genes and not their talent or potential. The thesis of chapter 4, “Drugs, Genes, and Enhancing Performance in Sport,” is that such behavior is either typically frowned upon or condoned without substantial thought put into whether persons have the right or choice to do what they please with their bodies, whether there is any metaphysical difference between performance-enhancing drugs and technologically advanced sports gear, and to what degree our enjoyment and awe of athletic achievements may increase if everyone were permitted to use artificially enhanced substances.

The fifth chapter (“Gender Equity in Sport: What Does Justice Require”) addresses two points: first, that sex equality should not always be equated with blindness to sex, and second, that the difference between equal and

identical treatment of athletes is sometimes misunderstood, and that what matters is that we have equal concern and respect for all participants in sport.

The Incompatibility Thesis—the corruption of academic values with athletic values—follows in chapter 6, “Sports on Campus: Intercollegiate Sports and their Critics.” Simon attempts to dissect the overlooked question of what place an athletic program should hold on a college campus and questions whether the incompatibility thesis is truly justified and when so, under which conditions. Chapter 7 (“The Commercialization of Sport: Marketing and Corruption in Competitive Athletics”) examines the Corruption Thesis—whether commercialization and its consequences such as increased player wages create a divide between professional athletes and the public, making human connection virtually impossible and thus imposing unfair demands from the public fan onto the professional athlete.

The final chapter (“Sports, Moral Education, and Social Responsibility”) reflects on what was learnt within the text, and examines the disjunctive role that sports used to and continues to play in developing honorable citizens by promoting and instilling a strong sense of virtuous character.

A critique of the work as a teaching aid should utilize some standard of goodness or effectiveness when it comes to evaluating the qualitative value of the object itself. Although I am sure that there are many contributing variables that make up a good or effective text, I will focus on: 1) its content and logical flow within and between chapters, 2) whether it is gratifying in its creativity yet construct-relevant for its reading audience, 3) whether it is applicable in some way—meaning that it mirrors past, present and highly probable future real-life scenarios and not merely possible ones, and 4) that its author holds some credence or distinction in having experience with the material. The final standard is much less weighted than the others and by no means is meant to suggest that “novice” writers cannot produce “good” works; nonetheless, given that sport ethics is such an applied endeavor with its own unique sets of challenges, it certainly helps to know that the author has had some considerable experience when dealing with these issues at an intimate level. Inevitably, there was much more to say about the contents than about the other areas of evaluation. This should not be read into in any negative way.

1. Content and Logical Flow. With the exception of two (chapters 7 and 8), each chapter begins with a real-life scenario or past event that sets up the chapter’s main themes and topics. Several thought-provoking questions then usually follow from the scenario, which Simon says are critical but by no means exhaustive when reflecting upon the chapter material. At the beginning of a chapter, some central concepts are brought to our attention as the focal point for further investigation that will follow—for example, the concept of fairness. Each concept is scrutinized in context and not merely treated to purely analytical treatment. This is helpful so that as one reasons through the problems stemming from the concepts, they do so from an applied practical

lens and not merely from within a vacuum. Take the above example of the concept of fairness. Simon discusses such a concept in the third chapter by focusing on its relationship with the concept of sportsmanship (as discussed by influential philosophers such as James Keating and Bernard Suits), and gets the reader engaged with the concepts by using familiar examples such as strategic fouling at the end of basketball games.

Simon often plays the devil's advocate in the manner in which he presents the arguments to a particular theme or concept. As such, it behooves the reader to assess each chapter's arguments and conclusions only after they have completed the entire chapter. At other times, he takes a personal stance on an issue after presenting the arguments to a particular chapter's thesis. If students are not self-confident in philosophical reflection and are not yet brave to disagree with an (any) author's work, it may be easy for some students to fall into the trap of believing that Simon's comments at the end of chapters are the final (correct) say in the matter. This may however be remedied by having students continually refer to the points made in the introduction of the book regarding relativism and rational inquiry—that we must be open to critiquing any point of view, including the author's.

Examining the logical progression of ideas within the book is not meant to imply that the chapters be read sequentially or in numerical order. A particular indifference to the layout of the book is that the latter chapters build well off their predecessors. Hence, although the themes and concepts are well interwoven throughout the entire text, certain ideas or arguments presented in later chapters cannot be fully understood without reading those prior to them. A good example of this is when, in discussing competition in chapter 7, Simon reflects upon an argument he previously used in the second chapter. It is therefore well-advised to proceed reading the text in a linear fashion as opposed to tackling the chapters out of order, as can be done with some other texts, such as Angela Lumpkin, Sharon Kay Stoll, and Jennifer Marie Beller's *Sport Ethics*. Even given this difference, I enjoyed Simon's text, as Lumpkin, Stoll, and Beller's felt more like participation within a classroom lesson and not as much of a dialogue, in which the reader is engaged by Simon.

Although Simon uses some very insightful questions to guide the reader, it would have been good to see them (or other more general ones) placed at the end of the chapters or chapter sections for critical review by the reader. That way, if the book is to be used as a pedagogical tool by sport practitioners, they could simply turn to the section questions periodically to reflect upon them, without the need to read through the entire chapter to find them (or bludgeon the print with permanent markers).

It is however regrettable that no significant attention was paid to the current cultural explosion of interest and participation in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighting. Perhaps Professor Simon disregards such an endeavor as inclusive in the world of sport and so not meriting mention. Whatever the case, it would have been very welcome to read Simon's expositions on the

ethical issues rife in MMA, if not at the very least provide a reason for why it did not deserve inclusion.

2. Enjoyment and Construct-Relevance. *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport* is unlike most of the philosophical texts one can expect to find in an ethics course or library bookshelf. Without boring the reader with ethical terms such as deontology and utilitarianism, Simon's book engages the reader with philosophically relevant material central to these concepts. This is not to say that understanding and engaging with such terms is worthless. In fact, one can argue that a particular weakness of the book is that readers should be equipped beforehand with a solid grasp of philosophical positions such as virtue or ethical egoism if they are to fully appreciate and understand how behaviors such as selfishness impact competition and sportsmanship. On the other hand, the use of the term "egoism" is not a necessary condition for understanding such a relationship. To this end, Simon truly engages the reader by extrapolating common lay terms from within his example cases and discussing their meaning and relationship to other terms and the situation at whole.

3. Practicality and Applicability. Throughout a chapter, Simon will often employ a healthy mix, but by no means an exhaustive one, of past real-life sport cases in order to illustrate his points quite vividly. Such a tactic is highly appreciative from my perspective as a coach because there are several practical situations in which a coach can encounter an ethical construct—such as fairness. Simon concludes each chapter by bringing the concepts together, reiterating why some arguments are strong enough to withstand scrutiny while others are downright fallacious, and often presents his personal views on the subject matter.

4. Authorship. Our information-driven and information-needy world publishes hundreds of books daily; effortless access to the internet has made it a popular and dominant mode of communication for millions where blogs gain credence. If we are to be well-informed, then we would expect that an author's knowledge and experience goes a long way to establishing the validity of their work. The author should not only be someone with an interest in the field, but an expert. Furthermore, in evaluating texts as teaching tools, some degree of credibility must be lent to one's ability to teach, in the hope that this facet is manifested in the writing. Robert Simon is a distinguished professor of philosophy and has authored numerous articles and books on the subject, including social, political, as well as moral philosophy. His experience as a teacher at a respected liberal arts institution for two decades supports his keenness to educate. His tenure as a successful golf coach whose teams have participated in the NCAA postseason tournament adds a personal touch to his views. Applied ethics is so applied because it does not stand in a vacuum, and individuals who walk the walk in their professions everyday can respect Simon for having a nontrivial connection to both worlds of sport and philosophy. Finally, each edition of this book was separated by years of

thoughtfulness and built-up experiences on the subject matter. All these are reflected in the topics that Simon introduces in each edition. Without hesitation, I recommend this book as a teaching tool and self-study guide to those involved in sport, ethics, and education.

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