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# Performative Feelings for Others: The Civil Repair of Organised Competitive Sports

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## Abstract

In many western nations, sport is an institutional component of civil society that may be considered from quite different outlooks. From the critical theorists' viewpoint, sport reproduces social hierarchies through competition and then colonises our democratic life worlds. Scholars of civil society argue that sport actors manoeuvre civic relations and fend off anti-civil pressures to allow integration, belonging and collective decision-making. This article positions sport actors and audiences at the interstice between hierarchies and solidarity, amid competition and friendship. Using Civil Sphere Theory, I present a cultural sociology of performance that highlights how sport actors interpret the democratic character (or lack thereof) of their own and others' sport actions. Drawing on eight months of participant field observations in Norwegian youth sport, I recreate an ethnographic tale of how coaches, players and spectators activate the civil sphere's symbolic and affective codes for this purpose. This dramatic sequence of events, played out over the course of the season, shows how sport itself can be shaped by actors who bring the civil sphere to bear and make sport a facilitating input to the discourse of the Nordic civil sphere. This process, I conclude, is contingent on performances of the civil sphere that make sport a stage on which to display performative feelings for others. When sport actors challenge the divisive, hierarchal character of organised competition and carry out a civil repair of sport, they expand the limits of civil inclusion and momentarily create a sporting civil society.

## Keywords

children and youth, civil repair, civil society, civil sphere theory, epistemic affect, impressionist ethnography, Nordic civil sphere, performance, sport

In summer 2011, I volunteered to help coach a 13-year-old girls' handball team. Although I had played team handball for many years, I had never coached. On my first day, coach

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Camilla guided me through the hallways of the handball facility. We passed court after court, and then Camilla stopped where some 14-year-olds were practising and asked, ‘Do you see how they run their practice?’ I observed that the coaches had divided their squad into two teams based on the skills of the players. Camilla nodded:

> This is completely different from how we run our team. Now well, I do not want to be all judgemental, but there are rules you know, about how to organise children’s sports. On our team, we do not separate the best players from the second-best players during practice. We believe that skills are best developed by dividing the squad into two equally capable teams. Some of the other coaches in the club think that we do not run our team hard enough, but that is just not our style.

We walked to another court where Camilla introduced me to a more civil way to approach sports.

Can sports be sites where the demands for inclusion in civil society are enacted? In this study, I examine the democratic ambitions of Norwegian children’s-sport actors and the performances they carry out to embody an idealised civil society. My aim is to add a dynamic dimension to the study of the civil sphere by stressing the agency of sport team coaches, players and audience as they shape that sphere. I argue that sports can be civil if actors perform democratic values and soften divisive competition.

Those who study sport and civil society can find themselves in the crossfire of two intellectual opponents (cf. Alexander, 1997). Critical theorists describe how sport’s fierce competition colonises and destroys democratic life worlds as actors reproduce inequalities of class, race and gender (Bairner, 2007; Bourdieu, 1984; Carrington, 2010; Messner, 2009); others view sport as an institution of civil society consisting of democratic volunteers fending off the pressures of internal competition hierarchies and external commercialisation and professionalisation (Allison, 1998; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Ibsen et al., 2019; Seippel, 2005). Yet, sport is neither a mere (re)producer of social inequalities nor inherently democratic through voluntarism (cf. Alexander, 2015). Thus, we must look carefully at what is done to shape (un)civil sport. How do actors manoeuvre the contradictions of sport’s exclusionary competition and a prospectively inclusive community?

To answer this question, I use Civil Sphere Theory (CST) to address the micro-cultural level of civil repair in sport. Through a grassroots ethnography, I emphasise the dynamic relationships between youth players, their coaches and parents, as well as the Norwegian national sport associations. Sport actors, I argue, are competent persons who can evoke hopes for civil repair. When sport becomes unbearably uncivil through exclusionary logics and aggressive competition, actors can performatively demand civil repair and inclusion in civil society (Alexander, 2006: 205). As an example, I tell the story of 13-year-old Tiril who starts to cry as she comes up short in the sport team. Her emotional performance not only awakens an empathetic response from her coaches and the parents in the stands, but also begins a journey that tests the team’s capacity to reincorporate Tiril into a sporting civil society. Through this account, I show that although voluntarism in children and youth sports is vital in civil society, it does not necessarily challenge how sports participants are ranked and utilised according to their skills and abilities (Harris et al., 2009;

Helle-Valle, 2008; Stenling, 2014). That challenge needs ongoing efforts by people who bring the codes of the civil sphere and national sport associations into sports.

This article highlights the endless tension in seeing and doing sport as either just another form of controlled aggression and competition or as a launchpad of goodwill and civil community. This process, I argue, is contingent on a social performance (Alexander, 2004) where actors convince each other, and onlookers, of their unpleasant experience of sports' excluding hierarchies and their goodwill to repair the sport community. In sports, we can enact the democratic code of the civil sphere in ways that show how the 'we-ness' of our community transcends the team's 'particular commitments, narrow loyalties and sectional interests' of competition (Alexander, 2006: 43). We can shape sport actions in the light of the broader universalism of the civil sphere and its binary categories of 'pure and impure into which every member, or potential member of civil society is made to fit' (Alexander, 2006: 54). Hierarchical and exclusionary as sport may be, actors can recognise the need to use the civil sphere so that sport is fleetingly *made civil*, solidary and inclusive.

This study is situated in the Nordic civil state which formally endorses the moral efforts of voluntary children's sport coaches, players, spectators and organisations to sustain a civil sphere that incorporates ever new generations and groups. Although this goal of a civil sport is contradictory and difficult, I first outline the background codes and contexts that shape the ideas of a civil society that in principle should help sustain a Norwegian mass sport where all children are included. To analyse how the codes of the civil sphere and Norwegian national sport associations are *put into sport actions*, I then conceptualise a combination of CST (Alexander, 2006) and a cultural sociology of performance (Alexander, 2004). Next, I describe how ethnography is a good way to explore the dynamics and dramatics that can occur when the civil sphere touches ground in the bodily encounters of sport. Against this backdrop, I analyse an exceptional and highly affective sequence of events when Tiril's team performs a civil repair of competitive sport.

## Committed in Principle: The Nordic Civil Sphere and Norwegian Sports

Relying on CST, I position Norwegian sports within the Nordic 'pro-civil states' that are 'committed in principle' to the civil repair of non-civil institutions (Alexander et al., 2019). For example, the Norwegian welfare state subsidises voluntary organisations as sites for social integration and expansion of the civil sphere. This subsidy comes with pro-civil supervision, but respects the 'arm's length principle' of non-intervention (Engelstad and Larsen, 2019). As a locus of the civil, the welfare state entrenches its universalistic conceptions of solidarity in associational life and, in turn, relies on returning inputs to civil rights and pro-civil ideals and mediation of tensions between liberalism and collectivism (Sciortino and Stack, 2019; Tognato, 2019). As part of this democratic nurturing of associational life, the Norwegian state extends its ideals of universalism into sport.

In contrast to free-market states that emphasise elite sports, Norwegian sports are committed in principle to an inclusive mass 'sports for all' (Giulianotti et al., 2019). One large national organisation governs nearly all competitive sports in Norway, with significant state supervision (Broch and Skille, 2018; Bergsgard and Norberg, 2010). The Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) with about 2 million members is

the largest voluntary organisation in the country of 5.4 million inhabitants. Nearly 90% of children participate at some time in sports that are ideologically regulated to protect them from damaging qualities of adult sports. For example, children's sports should underline free play and skill mastery instead of winning a rule-governed competition, and children should be allowed to participate in more than one sport instead of being pushed toward early specialisation (Støckel et al., 2010). The Nordic states formally endorse the commitment of sport – as a voluntary, local and non-state element – to offer social capital, sociality and physical health to the masses (Anderson, 2008; Ibsen et al., 2019; Seippel, 2005). Yet in Norway as elsewhere, sports face external market forces (Enjolras, 2002; Jarvie, 2003) and internal competition hierarchies that (Balduck et al., 2015; Messner, 2009; Stenling, 2014) challenge the principle of civil sport (Harris et al., 2009; Helle-Valle, 2008). As such, voluntarism, localism and non-state elements are not enough to sustain a civil sphere (Alexander, 2006). Rather, actors must manoeuvre internal and external pressures and switch civic actions on and off (cf. Alexander, 2006; Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014). Those who organise children's sports in civil society attempt – at least fleetingly – to stay 'committed in principle' to civil ideals and inclusion.

## Theory: Cultural Pragmatics in the Civil Sphere

CST theory can reveal how sport actors activate expectations and feelings of solidarity and how they perform sacred and profane values concerning what is good and bad sport. The civil sphere is a symbolic structure of meaning and emotion, a never fully realised cultural-cum-institutional realm and an idealised community defined by 'a universalising ethic of solidarity' (Alexander et al., 2019: 1). Sport actors can draw on the civil sphere to activate 'feelings for others' and a transcendent sense of we-ness shaped by 'our putative commitment to a common secular faith' (Alexander, 2006: 4). Importantly, the generative force of the civil sphere is made by its evaluative grammar of sacred and profane binaries that creates contradictions, inclusion and exclusion, and riddles democratic life with 'great and idealising expectations' as well as 'disgust and condemnation' (Alexander, 2006: 4). On my first meeting with coach Camilla, she revealed her ideals of an egalitarian sport and her condemnation of those who emphasise hierarchy. 'That is just not our style', Camilla passionately told me.

Sport is a major part of Norway's egalitarian civil society and is subsidised with universalising intentions; nevertheless, the function-specific organisation of sport and its goals of achievement generate inequalities through competitive distinctions. Children and youth athletes can be excluded from membership in civil society through mass sport which, by its very organisation, challenges the idea of universalism. Therefore, to do civil sport often requires perpetual civil repair: Actors can make renewed claims of belonging when they are excluded, try to credibly expand the civil sphere to those who 'come up short', and demand that the utopian aspirations of the Norwegian civil sphere become more real in everyday sporting life (cf. Alexander, 2006, 2015).

Inspired by McCormick's (2017) use of performance theory (Alexander, 2004), I study how actors in micro-cultural contexts draw on macro-discursive codes or symbolic structures to 'display for others the meaning of their social situation' (Alexander, 2004: 529). Like coach Camilla, actors use the civil sphere to evaluate civil society itself, its

members and their own and others' motives, relations and institutions. Civil *motives* are self-controlled, *not* wildly passionate like an all-out aggressive athlete or coach. Civil *relations* are trusting, honourable and friendly, *not* suspicious, self-interested and antagonistic like the coach who disregards her players. Civil *institutions* emphasise equality and inclusion, *not* hierarchy and distinction like many sports do. Using this theory in the micro-cultural context of sport, I study how actors dynamically perform the macro-codes of civility for themselves, teammates, opponents, coaches and the traditional 'audience' of spectators (Broch, 2020). Opposing actors struggle to embody stories of civility, using its codes to mark stages as civil and non-civil. To perform a civil repair of sport, whenever required, actors bring the generative macro-grammar of the civil sphere into sports worlds – onto the very field of play in this article – and stage this code with intent to convince themselves and others that they are challenging the function-specific dynamics of sport. These acts generate familiar stories of civility that guide our everyday life (Alexander, 2006: 60) in sport and society.

The civil sphere is an affective culture structure made up of a 'socially established consciousness, a network of understandings creating structures of feeling that permeate social life' (Alexander, 2006: 54). It is part of a macro-cultural, emotional landscape of codes, myths and narratives that allows us not only to display, but also to shape emotions and affective actions (Ng and Kidder, 2010; Pugh, 2013; Reed, 2011). The daily problematics of realising civility in sport, in which athletic skills are developed and competition carried out, is an ongoing process that can be dull, happy and painful (Lichterman, 2007), indescribable and explicit (Eliasoph, 2007). A successful performance of civility can generate a ritual-like experience in which actors achieve cathexis and audiences feel a psychological identification (Alexander, 2004). This blend of civil highs and lows, I argue, sustains a latent democratic force that actors can activate through *affective performances*. To understand how we arrive at a 'civil sport', I stress how actors cause the civil sphere to 'invade' the non-civil sphere of sports. This method replaces cultural dopes and 'sport idiots' with competent actors with the civil reflexivity to stay 'committed in principle' to a civil repair of sport. It reveals how affective performances of coming up short in sports can be conveyed through Tiril's tears and how her performative feelings awoke a team to its capacity to make civil repair and inclusion a fleeting end to sport.

## Methods: An Impressionist Ethnography of Civility

I rely upon a methodology situated among the sociological and anthropological work inspired by Geertz's (1973b) notion of 'thick description' (Alexander and Smith, 2003; Spillman, 2002). With an aim to explore social life's text-like qualities, the methodology uses the idea of how 'landscapes of meaning' or broadly available codes are brought to bear on emotions, understandings and actions (Eliasoph, 2007; Lichterman, 2007; Pugh, 2013; Reed, 2011).

In the spirit of intellectual generosity, I present an out-of-the-ordinary story of a handball player, whom I call Tiril, to crack open the relationship between civil society and sports. This tale is not about what usually happens, but about a series of dramatic moments that made a notable epistemic impression. Instead of simply using these events as a flashy introduction and then proceeding to a detached analysis of objective data, I

place this story at the centre of my analysis. My aim is to pay attention to the 'epistemic affect', make it into an 'epistemic device', and then analyse the 'epistemological trajectory' (Stodulka et al., 2018). The several-months-long story of Tiril is condensed and situated within the landscapes of civil meanings that I argue shape the narrative reality of her sports participation.

In this article I apply an impressionist methodology as an 'epistemic device' to recalibrate notions of the relationship between sports and civil society. In his ideal classification of 'tales of the field', Maanen (1988) outlined three ways to write ethnography, which importantly, are not mutually exclusive, and he does not profess one over the other. First, *the realist tale*, the most prominent form of ethnographic writing, is a documentary genre that mutes the author's voice to create an interpretive authority through one preferred reading. This method relates little about singular persons' experiences, but relates much about what is typical and about the categories or institutions that order social life. On the other side of the scale is the *confessional tale*, a highly personalised ethnography in which an active observer steadily questions the realist's cookbook of methods and documentation of facts to highlight the human qualities of fieldwork. While the confessional reveals the heart of a culture through displays of empathy and involvement, the research takes a moderate approach to downplay the exotic, understate the theatrical, and omit intense feelings.

Maanen's third type of ethnography, the one I have chosen here, is the *impressionist tale.* While impressionist might connote an artistic and imprecise methodology, Maanen uses the term to characterise a tale that moves away from idealised landscapes and sterile settings into more familiar, mundane and holistic depictions of a moment, in the mode of impressionist art. Moreover, the impressionist tale is a dramatic recall used to startle complacent scholars and create a participatory sense in the reader. Thus, the active writer/ethnographer amasses metaphors, phrasings and imagery to recreate an especially notable unfolding drama. The impressionist employs charitable self-judgement, yet with dramatic control of a poetic approach that aims to balance both objective and subjective dimensions of social life (see also Clifford, 1986) and to move readers back in time to the events that spurred a new abductive theorising (Reed, 2010; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

To those who favour the conventional tale, my strategy can be provocative, as it intentionally pushes the work with small-n-samples (Steinmetz, 2004) and meets scientific methodological concerns in irregular and unexpected ways, like Geertz's (1973a) fleeing the police after a Balinese cockfight or Goffman's (2014) seeing how children play/learn about fugitive life. Although Fine's and Wacquant's sport ethnographies are inspiring, my main emphasis is neither small groups (Fine, 1987) nor body techniques (Wacquant, 2004), but to show how studying the dramatics of civil repair can challenge our ideas about sports in society.

On the following pages, I retell and analyse the ethnographic tale of Tiril. In the summer of 2011, I began my search for a field site in my city where I could study Norwegian handball culture and coach–athlete communication. A couple of coaches of 16-, 15- and 14-year-olds turned down my request, saying it would interfere with their ambitions. But by mid-August Camilla and her team of 13-year-old girls warmly welcomed me. They proudly wanted to show me their communication philosophy in practice.

This started eight months of fieldwork with girls who were in the midst of the transition from children's to youth sports (Støckel et al., 2010). I observed how the coaches steadily negotiated and worked to fulfil their philosophy of an egalitarian sports team in which they tried to listen to what 'their girls' had to say. All four coaches, in their early and mid-50s, and all parents of the approximately 25 players signed informed consents. I carried out and recorded numerous informal talks with players, coaches and parents. As a long-time player, I conducted participant observations as I helped with everyday coaching activities and decision-making at the arena; therefore, I use the pronoun 'we' to incorporate my influence as I refer to some of the team's activities and decisions.

The girls practised after school two to three times a week and played games on weekends. After these two- to five-hour sessions, I returned to my home office to write field notes; therefore, the quotations in the analyses are not verbatim. From late August to the end of April, I carried out 74 days of fieldwork and wrote about 150,000 words of fieldnotes. I have changed the participants' names and the locations to protect anonymity, as well as to accentuate Maanen's (1988) impressionist principles of textual identity, fragmented knowledge, characterisation and dramatic control. In many ways, the tale of Tiril represents the team's condensed but never-ending work to sustain a civil sport competition.

## Act 1: Tiril Turns to Tears, and the Team Hopes for Civil Repair

The team I coached and observed was a quite typical Norwegian children's sports team. It was coached and administrated by four volunteer parents, all in their 50s, who had played handball, but who considered themselves a bit atypical. Over the years in which the parents had been coaching these girls, both coaches and players were somewhat protected by regulations to soften the competition craze of elite sports and the push for early specialisation (Støckel et al., 2010). Thus, game scores had not been kept, and seasonal tournaments had not ranked teams.

Although some parents adored this 'commitment in principle' to Nordic values of the civil sphere and a sport 'inclusive to all', others occasionally remarked that the coaches were a bit too soft and did not allow the children to develop their competitive skills. However, coach Camilla quite stubbornly holds that despite having organised the team with inclusive and civil intents, the girls perform quite well. But now that the girls were old enough to enter the more visibly competitive, less regulated youth sports, Camilla and her colleagues have instituted a democratic leadership model based on that of Marit Breivik, the renowned Olympic, World and European Champion coach of the national Norwegian woman's handball team. They were modelling what they thought were positive relations (Fine and Corte, 2017); therefore, the girls elected their own team captains, and the coaches talked with every single player to hear them out on personal and handball issues. The coaches prided themselves in leading a team in which skill hierarchies were softened or downplayed as often as possible, and the girls' parents told me they loved the coaches for this reason. Nevertheless, this approach was challenged throughout the season.

Tiril, who is about 140 centimetres tall with long, curly brown hair, was a well-liked girl on the team. In fact, she was perhaps a bit too kind on the field, not an aggressive attacker who dived into the defence to force her way through. Neither was she among the strongest or biggest girls on the squad, and maybe not among those her coaches or teammates would expect to have a future in handball. Yet, being modest and kind, empathic and trustworthy, Tiril was selected as a team captain. Perhaps the girls who voted for her thought she would excel as a caring captain.

For the first time that year, during games, but not practices, the coaches divided the squad into two teams based on skill assessment. To the best of my knowledge – although it was never up for public discussion – Tiril usually played on the second string, consisting of second-best players. Also, this team was in a league and would face off against opponents of a similar skill level. Therefore, team members would now encounter the organised antagonism of sport competition, which conflicted with the inclusion and equality their coaches stressed during practices. Even so, a good, trusting and friendly coach – at least as defined on this team – does not use second-string games to relax, but expects even those players to exercise full attention and determination. Come game time, Tiril will be praised and challenged like any other player.

Standing by the bench, I observe the coach call Tiril for a quick talk.

'Great effort, Tiril', the coach says. 'Now, I want you to try to break through the defence. Use your jukes [sham moves to mislead an opponent]. Challenge yourself. Can you do it?'

Tiril, a bit shy on the field, nods before running back to the game, her ponytail sailing. Once Tiril is back on the court, the coach shouts again for all to hear: 'Come on Tiril, I want you to try!'

Tiril's coach demonstrates his caring and belief in Tiril not only to her as they stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the side-line, but also to his audience – Tiril's audience – as he honourably shouts out encouragement. Tiril looks a bit embarrassed out on the court, but politely nods a silent 'yes'. However, she does not seem to dare to fully commit. Perhaps she wants to, but Tiril manages no jukes in the first half of the game.

The coach's performance, the one he has asked Tiril to join, has to do with self-confidence and the civil community. Repeatedly, I hear the coaches tell the girls: 'We do not ask you to do things we think you cannot do. We do not give you challenges we think you cannot solve'. Of course, to anyone who knows a thing or two about challenges, this statement is only half true. Nevertheless, in sport performance, a good try is praiseworthy as an attempt to master the game's skill requirements. As a civil performance, any attempt to execute a challenge can be considered a successful enactment by the trustworthy honourable coach of inclusionary practices among team members who care about each other. A challenge accepted puts this secular faith into action, no matter the result, and displays for the team and its spectators, the actors' civil 'we-ness' (cf. Alexander, 2006) and the group's style of civic action (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014). The team members believe in each other, and this belief both challenges Tiril and provides reassurance to do more.

During half-time, coach Bjørn adds his two cents: 'Let's go out there, on the court, and have fun, smile and play our game. Let's not be so anxious and afraid to miss the target and make mistakes. Challenge yourself a bit. Accept the challenges we give you. You must dare. What is the worst thing that can happen if we miss?'

Bjørn does everything he can to look like a big question mark, before he says, smiling: 'Well, then you will get new chances later'.

The girls get to their feet again, pick up what is left on the locker room benches and walk back into the hall. Smiling at Tiril, who is about half his size, Bjørn puts his hand on her shoulder and asks, 'Did you hear that, Tiril. Seize your opportunities. Take the challenge'.

'Oh, well, OK then', she replies, rolling her eyes as if to say 'stop nagging, but keep seeing me'.

Bjørn and I laugh wholeheartedly. It is a delicate manoeuvre, but Tiril rises to the challenge, first in a social performance, and then perhaps later in a successful handball game. Bjørn looks at me, shaking his head as he takes a seat on the bench, 'Tiril is the kindest girl in the world. She just smiles at everyone'.

A theatre of despair underscores the dramatics of Bjørn's task to urge Tiril to rise to the challenge. His game within the game is to filter the game script and the technicalities of sport through his landscapes of meaning. Bjørn orients himself in a way that uses the civil sphere to inform his *performative feel for the game* (Broch, 2020). He recognises that although he knows the girls from everyday encounters at the sports arena, he does not really know their inner clockwork, what makes them tick. Yet he thinks – or perhaps hopes – he knows that Tiril can dare to try. Such a hope is part of the commitment in principle to a civil sport in which everyone is included based on the assumption that anyone can master the game. The trick is to achieve this civil performance by helping Tiril to dare to perform at the right moment, in front of an audience during a match.

As the game draws to a close, our team leads by 15 goals. Tiril has played a good match, with several nice passes and shot attempts. In the final minutes, our team is awarded a penalty shot, and Bjørn asks, 'Is there anyone who has not scored yet?'

'Hmm, Tiril', coach Camilla answers.

'Tiril! Tiril, you're taking the penalty shot'.

Standing centre court, Tiril firmly plants one finger on her chest, and mimes her question, 'Do you want ME TO DO IT?!'

Her coach nods.

From the other side of the court, we watch her pick up the ball, and with what seems to be a good mix of fear and grit, take a stand at the seven-metre penalty mark. Oh, no, her legs are too close together! She will not get any force behind the shot standing like that. And so it goes. When the referee blows her whistle, Tiril sends the ball scorching outside the goal post, as if she is just trying to get the shot over with. She lifts her arms in despair and returns to the defence. Minutes later, the final whistle sounds. We win the game and cheer.

Feeling happy, I high-five the celebrating players, including Tiril. She has done a good job, and I want to share the joy and complement her for taking on the challenge. As I praise her for her nice fast breaks, she responds 'thank you' in a flat tone, and seems not quite able to enjoy the victory. A question arises from my gut and pops out of my mouth, 'Tiril, you did not really want to take that penalty shot, did you?'

Tiril is quiet as we walk towards the locker room with her teammates. Her eyes redden, and as a tear falls from her eye, my heart sinks, too, into my feet. My attempt to spread the joy of victory to all who have played the game is naïve. Tiril allows me to see

the game from another perspective – hers – and my good intentions and heartfelt sympathies disappear in a fog of frustration.[1] The bright desire for a goal, whether social or individual, in whatever way, obscures Tiril's great efforts.

At a loss for words and feeling guilty, I ramble on, 'But, you mustn't be sad. You were so great today. Great shots! Good runs! Next time you shoot the penalty, you must remember that you can. We all know you can. You have a good shot.' I pat her shoulder gently as we enter the locker room.

Seeing Tiril in tears, coach Camilla asks in her friendliest reporter tone if she is doing OK and happy with the match. Tiril answers quietly, 'Well, the penalty shot was not really any good.'

All the coaches chime in, 'But you did so good today, Tiril!'

Sometimes, however, not even a concert of nods and empathetic smiles, not even a chorus of coaches' empathy, seems to be enough.

Later, I think about all the times, all the practices and games, when the coaches have told the girls that a missed shot, or three, do not matter all that much. Tiril clarifies for me that missing a shot does matter to the girls, and some shots count more than others, too. The coaches know this, and are not really trying to convince the girls that they are wrong. Rather, they want merely to give the girls some tools and words to soften the seriousness of a play. But words alone are not enough; words must be put into action (Eliasoph, 2007; Lichterman, 2007). All coaches agree: Tiril must get another chance at a penalty shot before the season ends.

In many ways, Tiril intensifies our civil commitment through sports: a voluntary pledge that might seem dormant in a game of wins and losses, but whose power echoes in the Nordic civil sphere and through the coaching staff's democratic style. Tiril's affective performance (Alexander, 2004; Ng and Kidder, 2010; Pugh, 2013), her tears, not only question the we-ness of the team's community, but also show how the team's connectedness fails to transcend its particular commitments and narrow loyalties to competition. Tiril's performative feelings evoke civil sphere answers and a search for new performances that could reshape sport actions in the light of the broader universalism of the civil sphere. Tiril makes us feel how unpleasant challenges can be experienced in a world of wins and losses.

Although the wildly passionate sports coach might reduce Tiril's play time, increase her marginalisation within the team, and disregard the pro-civil promises of children's mass sport (Balduck et al., 2015; Helle-Valle, 2008; Stenling, 2014), the civil response is to seek civil repair and to reincorporate Tiril in the civil society of the sports arena. Through performatives, mass sports can be re-established as an inclusive social arena that emphasises play and skill mastery over winning and participation over hierarchy (Støckel et al., 2010). Tiril's team decides to respond with empathy to Tiril's performance of feelings, and the coaches give her the agency to influence their actions. Thus, Tiril's tears become performatives, a way of directing action through affective culture.

In the next act, Tiril's audiences enact their feelings for the symbolic other. Tiril must get another penalty shot to be reincorporated into the prospective civil society of sport. Civil repair is required.

## Act 2: The Team Puts on their Citizenship Hats, and Tiril Gets Another Chance

A week and a half later, I see my chance to tell Tiril the coaches' decision and to give her the chance to prepare mentally for what lies ahead. 'Tiril!' I shout gently as she and her teammates are leaving practice.

'Yes', Tiril answers as her friends continue down the hallway.

'Tiril, if it we get a chance, in a match, you know, sometime soon, if we get a penalty shot and if it is all OK' . . .

Tiril's eyes turn teary again. Her reaction throws me a bit off course, but I continue: 'Are you ready to take that penalty shot then, is that OK with you?'

I clench my teeth and try to smile as my stomach churns. The tears rolling down Tiril's face elicit a sensory familiarity that I almost feel in my gut. But through her tears, Tiril's answer is clear and confident, almost unaffected: 'Yes, I will be ready.'

'Good!' I reply. 'Remember, when the time comes, take a deep breath and say to yourself: I can do this.'

Almost a whole month passes before Tiril gets her second chance. As the season draws to a close, we play the Oslo Handball Club and quickly take the lead. After just a few minutes, we are awarded a penalty shot.

'Who will take it?' Bjørn wonders, scouting the field.

'Tiril will take it. Trygve's decision, remember!' Camilla recalls happily, including me in the coaching team's decisions.

'Tiril takes it', I agree.

Bjørn's voice thunders across the court: 'Tiril!'

She gasps and looks back in horror at the bench, points to herself and mimes an astonished 'ME!'

'YES, you. Tiril takes it!' Bjørn shouts back as Tiril dramatically slaps herself on the forehead.

She resolutely steps up to the task, towards the unknown result of the crystal-clear reality of a penalty shot. Bjørn smiles at Tiril and at the bench as he spreads out his arms, laughing: 'What are we? We are not some sort of community centre, are we? We are not the police of volunteerism, are we?'

Bjørn chuckles, and I believe, with a deep social consciousness that this is exactly what we are, or at least *can be* and perhaps at times *should be*. The coaching team offers, almost performatively forces, experiences of a social performance of solidarity with Tiril's mastery of sport performance, all within what Norwegians label the voluntary sector of the civil society. Bjørn's smile is wide as he looks down, emphasising his own thinking and experience of the situation. Happily, he raises his thumb, 'Good job Trygve, this is great stuff.'

The dramatics of Tiril's story may not be the usual tale that organised sports often generate. This performance is a *pro*-civil translation that makes sports a facilitating input to the discourse of the civil sphere. This is not just a test of our promise to Tiril, but a test of our ability to activate the civil sports community (Anderson, 2008; Jarvie, 2003). It is not simply an attempt to materialise the team's idealised civil identity and coaching style (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003), but a ritual-like chance to bring to life the pro-civil

state's 'principle commitment' to civil repair (Engelstad and Larsen, 2019; Sciortino and Stack, 2019; Tognato, 2019). Camilla happily recalls our promise, and Bjørn smilingly feels it working in his gut – thumbs up. Group projects like this appear from expressive, not-fully scripted social relations to generate fun (Fine and Corte, 2017), but the stakes are higher. The team has put on their citizenship hats and demands 'that the utopian aspirations of the civil sphere become more real' (Alexander, 2015: 174) so that life in civil sport associations can be inclusive and encouraging of all. At least for a moment.

We all focus on Tiril, standing alone at the seven-metre penalty mark. Does she have her most important weapon – her belief in herself and the knowledge that we support her? She seems a little calmer than the last time, her stand sturdier, about the width of her shoulders. She should be able to get some power behind the shot.

Tiril fires the ball towards the goal – a real rocket, blazing with precision toward the goalkeeper's right side and into the net! The bench jumps to their feet. 'Good job Tiril!' the coaches holler. 'Fantastic!' the spectators cheer, applauding.

But the referee calls the goal off; Tiril has moved her foot and overstepped the penalty mark. For some long seconds, as loud applause continues, confusion reigns and we wonder why the referee has cancelled the goal. In the eye of a hurricane of joyous confusion, Tiril receives an unmistakable wind of cheers from the stands, the coaches, and her teammates. Although each of us has followed Tiril's story from various viewpoints, and some of her teammates might even envy her the spotlight, the performative feelings for Tiril demonstrate a verisimilitude that defies the facts of the game. Democracy is not simply a game governed by technical rules, but also 'a world of great and idealising expectations' (Alexander, 2004: 4). The celebration of Tiril is so powerfully convincing that the referee blows her whistle again and again, even shouting for the opposing team to return from the centre court where they are lined up to take the pass-off after a goal. We slowly understand there has been no goal. The referee prevails and the game continues according to the rule book – the handball rule book, that is.

After a few minutes, Bjørn calls on Tiril to make a substitution. Returning to the bench, pearls of sweat on her face, she looks calm and happy, ready for a well-deserved breather. She has scored a fast break goal.

'Great job on the fast break, Tiril! What an awesome penalty, too', I say.

Tiril's smile seems sincere as she thanks me, adding with a twinkle in her eyes, 'Yes, well, except that the penalty shot was called off.' She doesn't appear to care all that much, and considering the applause, it does not seem like anyone else cares either.

'Next time,' I answer.

We win the game and get another three points to better our position in the league. But our accomplishment that day was not how we lived up to the competition. If we had blindly and aggressively followed the rules of the game, we would have allowed sports hierarchies to 'colonise and destroy' the democratic hope in our civil society activity. Just like critical theorists argue (Bairner, 2007; Carrington, 2010; Bourdieu, 1984; Messner, 2009), we would have kept on reproducing inequalities within sports and outside sports. The second-string game would have been insignificant, and Tiril would not have been a concern. The better player on the team would have taken the penalty shot. But the coaches, the audience and even the witty Tiril, admitting she had missed yet another penalty shot, all recognised this dark side of sport that critical-theory sociologists

documented so well. The very drama arose *because* the reflexive participants (cf. Eliasoph, 2007; Lichterman, 2007) – the players, coaches and parents in the stands – knew all too well the divisive function of sport competition, yet they still hoped for civil repair. Perhaps that is why a wave of social emotions washed powerfully over the court in the iconic moment when Tiril fired her second penalty shot. That instant proved that we had managed to put the affective code of the civil sphere into sport. It is not enough to be voluntary actors of the civil society institution of Norwegian sports who can manoeuvre civic relations and fend off anti-civil pressures (Allison, 1998; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Ibsen et al., 2019; Seippel, 2005). The civil sphere, its symbolic structure of meaning and emotion, has to be performed in ways that allow its code to shape emotions and affective actions (Ng and Kidder, 2010; Pugh, 2013; Reed, 2011). The team's egalitarian ambitions to be trusting, honourable and friendly and to emphasise equality and inclusion require daily attention. The moral and affective narrative of a civil children's sport has to be convincingly enacted, not 'performed' in the pejorative sense of the term. Performances of empathy are important but do not suffice. Tiril was no longer just any other player. She represented something greater than herself: 'the civil other' and the chance for a civil repair of sport. To make this happen, performative feelings for Tiril had to be enacted in a convincing and affective civil repair that reincorporated her in the prospective civil society of sport competition. So, we broke the rules of the game and celebrated a scored goal that never was.

## Conclusion: The Dramatic Civil Sphere Mediation of Sport Competitions

The debate over whether sport organisations are inherently civil or reproduce social power has clear limitations. On the one hand, sports are institutional components of a civil society (Allison, 1998; Anderson, 2008; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Ibsen et al., 2019) with voluntary actors who face external pressures to their civil mission (Balduck et al., 2015; Enjolras, 2002; Harris et al., 2009; Helle-Valle, 2008; Jarvie, 2003; Seippel, 2005; Stenling, 2014). On the other hand, external pressures and inequalities colonise sports to reinforce their internal competition and hierarchies which destroy democratic life worlds (Bairner, 2007; Carrington, 2010; Bourdieu, 1984; Messner, 2009). To the study of sport and civil society, I offer a view that embraces the ambivalence of this duality and demonstrates how actors can manoeuvre these dark and bright sides of sport.

Sport actors also can be citizens with democratic ambitions. They, too, compete to embody an idealised civil society. This article explored how a group of civil society actors in Norwegian sports used the binary code of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006) to shape civic action. Using this code as a performative, sport actors can direct civil actions and incorporate those who might come up short in the sporting civil society. They can pragmatically tone down aggressive competitive traits, emphasise trusting, honourable and friendly relations and stress equality and inclusion, *not* hierarchy and distinction. On journeys to a civil repair of sport, coaches, players and parent spectators must reflect on the ambiguities in sport and find affective solutions to reshape their everyday activities. These solutions do not simply happen if actions take place in civil society and if we follow the sport's 'neutral' rulebook of fair play. Rather, civil repair of sport occurs when

performative feelings create surprising dramas in which the tenacious everyday democratisation of sport and civil society breaks the game rules.

Throughout the season, I met no one who naïvely viewed sport as simply a ritual of incorporation and no one who condemned it as a ritual of pure competition. The team I spent time with existed amidst critical club colleagues who cultivated competition and parents who supported the team's egalitarian style. They were primed for civil interpretation and anticipated moments in which the civil sphere could be brought into the game.

When Tiril missed her penalty shot, sport became glaringly divisive and hierarchal. Most of her teammates had scored a goal, and Tiril's place in sporting civil society community was threatened. She had to score a goal to feel part of the civil society ritual that defines mass sport in Norway. As a member of a team that believed in the Nordic civil sphere, Tiril was given the agency to kindle civil repair to expand the limits of civil inclusion in sport. At the interstice of the civil sphere's abstract symbol structure and Tiril's concrete tears, coaches, players and parents enacted an affective civil repair of sport. They activated the macro-cultural and affective landscape (Ng and Kidder, 2010; Pugh, 2013; Reed, 2011) of the civil sphere through performative feelings for others. In the act of battling for another goal and another victory, a civil spheric storm mounted and awaited its release. As the story slowly emerged, sceptics were moved by Tiril who played the leading role in a tale that signified the civil and non-civil pressures of sport. Performative feelings for others changed the game, for the moment. When Tiril's shot hit the goal, a hopeful but never fully achievable civil sport was realised.

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## Note

1. 'Moods' like fogs, Geertz (1973b: 97) pointed out, 'settle and lift' as a condition from which they spring.

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