

# Ritual pathways and dramaturgical efforts: Negotiating the meaning of organized play in Norwegian children's sports

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## Abstract

This article joins Durkheim's theory of cult and Goffman's notion of an interactional membrane to show how rituals transform social life from mundanity to ritual, and back again. I update these classical theories with a cultural sociology of performance and the sociology of fun to emphasize diversity in social compositions, contextual transformations, and contradiction in meaning. With an abductive methodology, I leverage an ethnography of children's sports in Norway to show how we carry out symbolic work to set sports apart from the mundane and then meaningfully enact games either as an attractive play modality or as a constrained organizing of creative play. Dramaturgy, not athletic success, is key in this study. Children's sports, as an arena for tacit learning about symbolic modalities, show us how much effort it takes to create ritual-like encounters and fun. The study also reveals how broadly available codes about children's sports, and about play itself, are worked into sports through social performances where adult coaches and children manoeuvre the possible meanings of sports. The result is a theory of the multiple pathways for symbolic work we can travel to create ritual-like interactions.

## Keywords

Cult, childhood, Durkheim, fun, Goffman, social performance, ritual, sport

What structural pathways and dramaturgical efforts are needed to create rituals? With an ethnography on children, I argue that we must expend a great dramaturgical effort (Goffman, 1959) to travel the pathways of the cult (Durkheim, [1912] 1995) that make sports ritual-like. A cultural sociology of performance (Alexander, 2004) shows how this achievement to transform social life from mundanity to ritual, and back again, is contingent on our use of symbolic structures.

While some see standardized and bureaucratized sports as examples of modernity's movement away from ritual to a disenchanting, value- and goal-rational society (Guttman, 2004), the study of 'ritualistic'

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sports suggests otherwise. Sports are imbued with societal values (Birrell, 1981; Jijon, 2015), dramatize conflicts (Geertz, 1973; Hartmann et al., 2022), and evoke social evaluation (Ji, 2022; Klima, 2022). Sports foster the creation of idiocultures and communities (Fine, 1987, 2015; Halldorsson et al., 2017); its interactions are played out as narratives with recurrent characters (DeLand, 2018, 2022) and can deepen our emotions (Collins, 2004; Corte, 2022). To this literature, I contribute a multidimensional account of the *ritual modalities* we manoeuvre and the *symbolic effort* we must expend to create and sustain sports as ritualistic.

As a ritual form, sport is a volatile modality with interactional leeway. To capture this form, I juxtapose Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) action-oriented theory of the inner clockwork of the ritual, the cult, with Goffman's (1961: 73) concept of an interactional membrane controlling 'the flow of externally relevant sentiments into the interaction'. While both theorists deal with the transformation of mundanity into ritual, the former sees this process as a structured modality preceding the action and the latter sees rituals emerging from interaction. Durkheim reveals how the action patterns of the negative cult separate sports from other symbolic domains and how the positive cult makes sports an end. For Goffman, sports encounters emerge from collective actions that orchestrate dramaturgy and fend off external distractions to allow fun. Together, they reveal the symbolic pathways travelled and efforts expended to create rituals.

For many, the terms sport and performance awaken images of achievement, championship medals or players who have obtained high standards of competence. However, in this study, *performance* indicates a dramaturgical emphasis. I update Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) and Goffman's (1959, 1961) ideas of ritual as an opportunity structure (Smith, 1999) and dramaturgical efforts in fun, respectively, with a combination of social performance theory and the sociology of fun. This allows me to show how we use symbolic codes and narratives in action (Alexander, 2004) to shape sport's many contradictions, varied social compositions and contexts (Broch, 2020; DeLand, 2022; Ji, 2022). As we make fun a collaborative sequence of actions that delineates group identity (Corte, 2022; Fine and Corte, 2017), these symbolic efforts in social performances emerge as a vital, yet undertheorized, component. I therefore turn to show how children and adults work with diversity and paradox as they separate the organized play of sports from other play forms. It then takes considerable dramaturgical efforts to travel the cult's pathways and to make fun the collaborative action sequence transforming mundanity into a ritual.

To stress agency within the plausible limits of culture, this paper has three sections. I first define Durkheim's notion of the cult and Goffman's theory of Fun in Games and outline the cultural sociology of performance and the new sociology of fun. Second, I position my ethnography with some notes on methodology and the context of Norwegian children's sports. Next, I present a fourfold empirical illustration that, in sum, reveals the *symbolic know-how* and *effort* it takes to carry out sports. Children's sports in Norway are far from the seamless acts of elite sports and the professionalized training in academies and talent-development programmes. It is a quite chaotic and voluntarily overseen milieu, full of surprises and non-sport activities. Here we clearly see how social performances of the negative cult fail and succeed, and how the energy required to attain and sustain the positive cult is assembled and challenged through social performances. The result is a multidimensional analysis of how players and coaches twist and turn their codes of play to achieve or disrupt an act of ritual-like sports and fun in games.

## Ritual theory: Cults and encounters

A ritual is an interactional form that shapes and sustains the emotional bonds of a community and gives meaning to objects and practices with no intrinsic value. Within a ritual, the cult is an action pattern that allows and guides interactions, but encounters themselves are also ritualistic, as interactants must work to sustain (or disrupt) shared action patterns and a mutual focus. The cult provides the interactional rails and the interactants assemble the pieces needed for the ride.

The cult is a concept arising from Durkheim's classification of rituals. It uncovers how we draw boundaries between symbolic domains and prevent them from encroaching on one another. In the

words of Durkheim, these are boundaries between the profane and the sacred, and between the (favourable) sacred pure and the (disastrous) sacred impure (Kurakin, 2015). To allow boundary drawing, the action pattern of the cult has two analytically distinguishable aspects – one negative, the other positive – that are empirically intertwined and presuppose one another (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 303). While being conspicuously mundane, sports need to be separated (negative cult) from other profane contexts to approximate the ritual-like. When this is done, and if we account for the ‘relations of disparity and incomparability among sacred’ pure and impure (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 306), sport can befit ritual-like ends (positive cult). While rules of conduct, standardization and ceremony are vital, the cult emphasizes how our enactment of collective representations and classifications allows a pathway to ritual.

The negative cult, a dramaturgy of separation, is a coordinated performance system both inhibiting and invigorating: ‘We can enter into close relationships with sacred things only if we strip ourselves of what is profane’ (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 313). The negative symbolic action is a means to an end. It provides access to the positive cult. To get game-ready, athletes remove their ‘civilian clothes’ and change into game attire. Coaches tell players to check their social lives and focus on the play. Thus, the negative cult purifies and sanctifies through privations. It invites thrills as individuals find themselves at a sometimes painful distance from the ordinary and consoling. Although the negative cult serves these crucial means, it is not an end.

Conversely, the positive cult is a confident, enthusiastic celebration, a series of actions intended ‘to ensure the well-being’ of a community by allowing public meanings to spread and materialize (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 331–333). Prepared for contact with the sacred through the negative cult, participants in the positive cult engage in ‘actions rather than restrictions’ (Smith, 2020: 52). Durkheim named imitation, contagion, drama and performance as the positive cult’s creative, aesthetic and emotive behaviors (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 362). If we synchronize in its action-rhythms, we can experience the cult’s moral community in bodily ways. When athletes move together in well-executed game sequences or audiences immerse in sport’s kinetic theatre, games are charged with collective emotion-energy (Collins, 2004; Corte, 2022; Turner, 2012). Notably, ‘a single rite can serve several ends’ and ‘several rituals can be used interchangeably to bring about the same end’ (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 390). Moreover, symbolic systems hold sacred pure and impure forces driving us to maneuver and keep apart the favourable from the disastrous, the good from the evil (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 390). Therefore, rituals are not definitive, but emerge from our affective maneuvering of cultures.

The cult might invoke assumptions about using ‘structure’ to explain sports, but I am essaying *symbolic actions*. In line with Durkheim, Goffman sees rituals as ‘world building activities’ (1961: 27) but explains rituals’ relative autonomy as emerging from interactions. We establish rules of relevance and irrelevance to reorder and transform interaction. Then we test each other to see what aspects of the broader world we can introduce to the encounter. Can a proposed symbolic be embellished, or must it be disguised? As the wider world ‘is *worked into the interaction activity*, more than a re-ordering or transformation of pattern occurs. Something of an organic psychobiological nature takes place’ (Goffman, 1961: 65, emphasis added): an interaction membrane emerges to protect the encounter and filter the social meanings that are introduced. External pulls and distractions outside the encounter are held in check.

With Goffman, we see the dramaturgical effort needed to create and sustain rituals. This world-building effort generates interaction rhythms that we can immerse ourselves in, sustain and experience as a social electricity of community (Corte, 2022). Durkheim spoke of effervescence. Goffman spoke of euphoria and claimed that games are good to think with. Sports’ uncertain outcomes and highly sanctioned emotional displays require our meticulous filtering of the social meanings we use to enliven and excuse us from its actions:

Games can be fun to play, and fun alone is the approved reason for playing them. In contrast to his treatment of ‘serious’ activity, the individual claims a right to complain about a game that does not pay its way in immediate

pleasure and, whether the game is pleasurable or not, to plead a slight excuse, such as an indisposition of mood, for not participating (Goffman, 1961: 17).

Games, as social relations, fail if they are not fun, if we are not able to maintain play and the interactional membrane protecting it. As *ritualistic encounters*, sports shatter if our work to piece together its symbolics ceases to be an end. However, with effort, we can travel the cult's pathways to sport. A track to the sacred pure (favourable and fun) is taken when we perform negative cults and filter broadly available culture in making a 'serious' and engrossing game. We can, of course, object to a game's 'seriousness', deny the negative cult or mark sports as sacred and impure (harmful and unpleasurable) to fragment it and piece together other games.

Importantly, without emphasizing dramaturgical efforts, the negative cult is seen as an empty scaffold of rulebound conduct and technical skills are seen as *the* (disenchanted) path to immersion. Disregarding rituals' innate indeterminacy – how we manoeuvre the sacred pure and impure – conceals the meaning-making and negotiations of social and behavioural diversity in sports.

### Social performance and fun in games

While the rituals Durkheim theorized are less frequent today and their meanings are shorter-lived, meaning-making and the performance element of ritual remains central to social life. Redefining 'ritual as a particular kind of performance, a highly "successful" one' (Alexander, 2017: 4), we underline performance, rather than ritual per se, to clarify the symbolic *efforts* made to put culture structures into action; to create, mediate and reject ritual-like sport. I propose that the cult and the interactional membrane protecting it is established through social performances. Dramaturgical efforts enable us to call the cult into existence and use its ritual pathways, a cultural structure itself. Simultaneously, we infuse sports with broadly available codes, narratives, and myths, allowing us to understand and shape its actions from specific viewpoints. Sport actors, between ritual and strategy, filter meanings to enable 'fun in games'.

A social performance is a process in which actors put broadly available culture into action to 'display for others the meaning of their social situation' (Alexander, 2004: 529). In complex societies, meanings are contested and fragmented (*de-fused*). Through performance, we try to bring meanings and actions together again (*re-fuse*). Futile in our attempts, *de-fusion* maintains a distance between actors, symbolic codes and actions, and the performance looks inauthentic. If successful, *re-fusion* creates symbolic intimacy, and we accept the performance's action directives as real (Alexander, 2004). The cultural structures we bring to actions categorize and animate our social relations, but they are not inevitably accepted as 'ultimate truths'. Culture allows us to understand and shape actions from different viewpoints (Spillman, 2020). We consciously and unconsciously use codes to shape profane as well as sacred pure and impure actions through performances and counter-performances (Malacarne, 2021; Smith, 2008). Ritual-like sports are not generated by ritual causality, but through social performances where participants negotiate the meanings and boundaries of integration and social criticism.

In adapting social performance theory to sports, we need to conceptualize how culture enters games via the symbolics of play (Broch, 2020). Sports allow autotelic play (Huizinga, [1938] 1950) within rule-governed games where technical skills are central (Wacquant, 2004). But play-states, immersion or flow in mastering rules and skill challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) depend on communities imbuing games with symbols (Mead, [1934] 2015; Turner, 2012). In sports, technical and cultural mastery can be *re-fused* through social performances (Broch, 2020) aiming to 'recover a momentary experience of ritual' (Alexander, 2004: 548).

When social performances bring the cult to life and sustain an interactional membrane enabling fun, sports become an end. As such, fun is a collaborative 'sequence of action that produces – and is perceived as producing – joint hedonic satisfaction while delineating group identity and establishing boundaries to those who do not belong' (Fine and Corte, 2017: 66). In ritual-like sports, this sequence of action is loosely culture-structured by the cult and the game, allowing participants to play and have fun in carrying

out social sport performances. If successful, ‘the social acceptance and the delight in realizing oneself within the social promotes the binding of friendship groups’ (Corte, 2022: 81). Formal regulations alone can neither assure group identities (Fine, 1987) nor the sequencing of action (DeLand, 2018) that generate the emotional energy (Collins, 2004) of flow, play and friendships. Fun in games is contingent on our *effort* to carry out social performances of the cult and our filtering of broad culture into rule-bound sport-scripts. Joint satisfaction and flow are therefore hard to obtain and maintain. Our deep play (Geertz, 1973) must be experienced as an authentic, seamless fusion of culture and actions (Alexander, 2004; DeLand, 2022; Hartmann et al., 2022), neither as a performance in the pejorative sense of the term, nor as a mindless pursuit of the goal rational.

Emphasizing agency within the plausible limits of culture – our active use of symbolic structures to transform social life from routine to ritual, and back to mundanity – exposes sport as a volatile, world-building activity. If the social performances of the negative cult fail, there can be no positive cult and no fun in sports. However, if we follow the action directives delineating our play, we enable the pathways of the positive cult (Kurakin, 2015): the sacred pure and impure. Contingent on the symbolic structures we filter into the positive cult and perform, sports can be enacted either as a collaborative and ritual-like organizing of autotelic play or as constrained, displeasing and socially objectionable. Sports are therefore volatile, contingent on our dramaturgical effort and use of the cult as a pathway to allow ritual-like experiences. Even so, not everyone will find fun in the games we play, agree with the meanings we imbue in its actions, or share its dominant identities and viewpoints. Attempts at playing together will likely meet counter-performances challenging and redirecting the chance of ritual-like sports.

## **Methodology: An abductive ethnography of sports**

This is an ethnography of a group of children’s difficult task of playing together and the ongoing work of coaches to organize their play as a sport. Lived stories from the field (Corte, 2022; Turner, 2012) and ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) imbue the modalities I use to interpret (Reed, 2011) ‘dramatic’ mundanity (Maanen, 1988). The result is an abductive challenge (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) to ideas about the sport as depleted of autotelic play or as mere technical deeds.

Participant observations were conducted over four years in a handball team of boys ranging in age from 7 to 10 years old, yielding field notes of nearly 100,000 words from 135 practices and 20 game days. Having played handball for many years and previously conducted participatory ethnographies in children’s sports, I volunteered as a coach to join practices, games and meetings. Being a part of the team, I use the pronoun ‘we’ to include my influence as I refer to some of the team’s activities and decisions. For ethical reasons and to protect the anonymity of the children and adults of this study, I draw on a broad range of data and informal interviews with coaches outside this milieu to ask if the problems of my team were indicative of problems in other children’s sports teams, too. Furthermore, to be analytically sharp yet vague about individuals, I constructed only a few pseudonyms made up of several boys and condensed the many coaches I have worked and talked with into one ‘Coach Teddy’.

The team I coached with Teddy consisted of two to four volunteer adult coaches and about 20 players from various parts of the town. We practised two evenings a week during an eight-month period from fall to spring. Thinking about how the children experienced playing handball was a regular business carried out by the coaches. Certainly, we did not think we could show up with no plan and some ritual causality or effervescent aura would magically transform the individual boys into one moving body. Yet the effort needed to teach the children to play together – the empirical puzzle of this paper – was a bit of an unfolding mystery.

## **Context: Sports and play in Norway**

Culture shapes sports practices. In Norway, social performances of children’s sports are shaped by a set of principal commitments to civil society via fun in games, and its practices are monitored and commented on in relation to whether they make a pro-civil input to the civil society.

One large national organization governs nearly all competitive sports in Norway: the two-million-member Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), the largest volunteer-run organization in the country of 5.4 million inhabitants. NIF resides within the Nordic 'pro-civil state' that regulates non-state and civil institutions to 'commit in principle' to democratic values and universalism. In contrast to free-market states that emphasize elite sports, Norwegian children's sports are committed in principle to an inclusive mass 'sports for all' (Giulianotti et al., 2019). Nearly 90% of Norwegian children have participated in NIF's mass sports, which are ideologically regulated to protect them from the 'harmful' features of adult sports. In contrast, elite sports are considered to foster aggressive talent development, goal-rational achievement strategies and commercialization. Children's sports in Norway are expected to accentuate autotelic play and skill mastery instead of winning a rule-governed competition (Støckel et al., 2010). This emphasis is also the ideological basis for the state's subsidies to children's sports.

Sports scholars often distinguish between 'power and performance' and 'pleasure and participation' models that either underline defeating and dominating others to win or emphasize enjoyment, personal expression, and social inclusion (Coakley, 2009). In Norway, distinctions are often drawn between elite sports and mass sports. The former involves professionalized and commercialized sports. The latter is voluntaristic and supported by a state that views children and youth sports as part of a democratic process fostering healthy citizens. However, in practice, the codes and narratives of power versus pleasure models, of elite versus mass sports, tend to mix as a set of evaluative codes for interpreting sports (Broch, 2022; Helle-Valle, 2008). Under pressure from commercial interests and so-called 'talent development programs', Norwegian children's sports volunteer coaches and administrators are 'committed in principle' to the pleasure and participation model and to fostering arenas for mass participation in organized play.

The pro-civil input of Norwegian sports is often evoked and monitored via a semiotic play code and its moral narratives. Play – as autotelic, voluntary, unproductive and creative (Huizinga, [1938] 1950) – is key to the public, and political shaping of children's rights in Norway. Philosophical ideas from Rousseau and Dewey are alive in Norwegian kindergartens and schools via the 2013 United Nations' *Articles 31 and 12* on the rights of the child: to rest, join organized leisure, engage in free play and have their opinions heard regardless of physical, social, or economic abilities (Løndal, 2019). Similarly, NIF states, 'A playful sport is a sport with joy – sport is play' and an arena where children should have their opinions heard (Skille and Moen, 2021). In the egalitarian and peculiarly anti-authoritarian Norway (Schieffloe, 2019), differences between children and adults are often downplayed through a pro-civil softening of hierarchies and letting children play 'on their own terms'. As such, play is not only a state of being (Huizinga, [1938] 1950), but also a collectively imbued representation and rhetorical code (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

The multidimensionality of play, which is seldom debated politically in Norway, formed my contradictory ethnographic field where interlocutors competed in displaying sport as inclusive and fun in shared autotelic play or as socially constrictive and hierarchically organized. Since formations of group identities do establish boundaries (Fine and Corte, 2017), neither of these interpretations was 'false'. However, given that it is taboo in Norwegian children's mass sports to exclude players via skill assessments or repressive social barriers, negotiations of play are a more soothing and acceptable symbolism. Play therefore signifies *and* challenges sport as a leisure activity that pays its way in immediate pleasure, and it is experienced *and* monitored as a powerful cultural code making sure and asking whether sports allow everyone to join in.

## Analysis

Participation in children's sports is normative in Norway. Sometimes children choose to enter sports themselves and sometimes their parents decide for them. At times, children are brought to practice by their parents without really daring, and at times refusing, to participate once they

arrive. Occasionally, the involvement of such hesitant children serves to code sports as non-play, non-creative and forced, and thus fragment attempts at enacting sports as autotelic fun. This range of participatory forms all begins with parents who bring their kids to the arena, waiting to see how it all turns out.

### *The failed negative cult*

The negative cult is a dramaturgical performance system separating sports from other social realms by withdrawing from the mundane and prohibiting certain ways of acting. When six- and seven-year-olds meet up for practice, parents usually follow them into the locker room and help them suit up. Laces tied, kids who are comfortable with the setting hug their parents goodbye. Uncomfortable kids often have their parents stick around, close by. Today, a new boy is joining us for the first time. I walk over to say hello to the little fellow. He looks quite uncomfortable, standing by the sideline, between his mother's legs clinging to her thighs.

'Hi, what is your name?' I ask.

'Dmitry', his mother replies in a friendly voice.

'Nice to see you, Dmitry. Are you going to join us today? Do you want to join me and say hi to the other boys?' I ask, trying to catch his worried eyes nervously scanning the court.

'I do not want to', he says.

'Yes, you do', his mother replies. 'I know you want to try'. She encourages him and gently, but firmly, uses her legs to push him out of his hiding place and in front of her body.

'Well, my name is Trygve, and I think you know a couple of the other boys already. So, whenever you are ready', I smile.

His mother attempts another push, but the boy repeats, 'I do not want to', and stays by her side. Accepting the negative cult involves the privations of leaving a perhaps comfortable situation to enter another set of situational demands. This can indeed be painful.

As I turn away from Dmitry, I find a couple of boys have removed their shoes and are sliding around the court on their socks, using their shoes as soccer balls. With a couple of blows of the whistle, and a couple more, the boys assemble around the coaches for our welcome ritual and we talk about what we are going to do that day and the importance of wearing shoes.

As painful as it might be to let go of a parent's hand or to lace up shoes tightly, the negative cult must be enacted to set sports apart from other social realms *and* other types of play. This is tricky and contingent on our use of the negative cult to reshape ideas about play. The use of props (Alexander, 2004) and the entry onto the sports stage involve a movement from unorganized, creative play onto a court where participants play together within the social frames of a game (Mead, [1934] 2015) – preferably with shoes on their feet! This process might be particularly acute in cultures such as Norway, where ideas about children's participation in mass sports romanticize ideal-typical unorganized play even though it may occur in an adult-organized setting. Yet, it also elucidates a generational discrepancy of interpretation. For enthusiastic adults, sports often represent a clear break from profane life to allow autotelic play. This is not always so for children. They must first dare to enter the court and then accept sport as an adult-organized opportunity for autotelic play.

Thus, the negative cult can fail in many ways. Kids doing ideal-typical, unorganized play (Huizinga, [1938] 1950) on the sports court is one thing. Kids showing up for practice with no clear enjoyment is

another. Despite coaches' attempts to furnish the negative cult, ritual-like experiences cannot emerge from the interaction without collaborative efforts (Corte, 2022; Goffman, 1961). The failure of the negative cult is, nonetheless, not a conclusive failure. The image of Norwegian mass sports as a normative site for incorporation (Broch, 2022; Helle-Valle, 2008) cultivates an ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Underlining ideal-typical play instead of winning a rule-governed contest (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Stöckel et al., 2010), coaches should 'commit in principle' to allow 'all kids' to join 'on their own terms'. Coaching children ages six to eight therefore often involves organizing unorganized play-opportunities, politely accepting, but also wondering why some of the kids participate. Many a parent asserted that they forced their children to be physically and socially active, and thus re-refused dominant ideas about pro-civil children sports as a social good rather than professionalized talent development. However, in time, Dmitry let go of his mother's thighs, and most of the boys (most of the time) kept their shoes on. Most coaches I talked with considered this a waiting game. When sports are for all, a coach must wait and see which kids find pleasure in sport. Meanwhile, sports should be enjoyed as a sociable children's activity, with tiny sporting achievements along the way.

### *Successful negative cult*

Achieving the negative cult demands more than players suiting up for practice and stepping onto the court. Dmitry's refusal to join the play and the boys' scurrying around in their socks prove this point. To attain the negative cult, we must carry out social performances – arrange culture in action (Alexander, 2004) – to create 'valuable' encounters worthy of our 'respect', outside of profane life (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 304). Ritual-like experiences therefore require more effort in separation processes (Smith, 1999), more emotional energy and shared concentrations (Collins, 2004; Corte, 2022; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) than routine mundanity.

It is Wednesday afternoon and eight-year-old Mark smiles and tells everyone that we are having fun. He runs and dribbles the ball through the staged obstacle course, full force. Turning the last practice cone, and almost out of breath, he proclaims, 'I like to run!' When the kids are sent to the bleachers to grab a drink, have a break, chat and sit closely together, often hugging and snuggling as friends, Mark returns to my side and drops down to do a couple more pushups.

Don't you want to grab a drink?

'No way, I just want to practice. You know, on Mondays I cross-country ski, on Tuesdays I swim and earlier today I had PE!' Mark pants.

That's awesome; you really like to work out!

Non-symbolic approaches can clarify many physical and psychological dimensions of sports, but seldom reveal a sports team's cultural efforts (Fine, 1987; Halldorsson et al., 2017). Mark often left our practices pale grey in the face, almost sobbing of fatigue, as he used sports as a means to an end (Durkheim, [1912] 1995): a world-building activity in which he experiences a 'serious play' of determination (Broch, 2020; Geertz, 1973). Showing up for sports is not enough. The negative cult must be performed, 'valued' and 'respected'. Shoes laced, Mark ran the pathways of the negative cult and imbued it with codes of individual determination in a goal-rational world (Guttman, 2004). He showed us, like a few other eight-year-olds, that external pulls and distractions from outside sports were held in check (Goffman, 1961). His dramaturgy acted upon himself; in his drama, he did not even feel thirst. Other children found other pleasures in sports. There are other ways to pay homage to the cult. Friendship relations, being kind and civil sociality are highly respectable codes, too (Broch, 2022; Helle-Valle, 2008). Notably, social acceptance and the delight of realizing oneself within the friendship group (Corte, 2022) often involved the interplay of symbolic dimensions through the code of play. Mark's enactment



of hard work and his teammates' snuggling on the bleachers gradually introduced them to a sports world where displays of 'fun in games' and 'autotelic play' can be imbued and challenged in the various collaborative action sequences that sports teams allow.

### *Failed positive cult*

Sports routines, rules and regulations create predictability, but the meaning of sports must be recurrently staged (DeLand, 2018; Fine, 2015). When the negative cult and its interactional membrane are established, sports are exposed to broadly available meanings that are 'worked into the interaction activity' (Goffman, 1961: 65). This process, characterized by our bringing of macro meanings into interaction, can be understood as a contest of social performances and counter-performances that make or break the world-building activity of sports as autotelic play.

'Hey guys! Are you ready to play?' Practice is about to start; Coach Teddy kindly reminds the nearly nine-year-old boys that they 'can talk about [electronic] gaming some other time'. He asks them if they remember: first, we are a team and we root for each other; second, we are here to have fun and third – Eric raises his eyebrows, and with an impatient, flat tone, answers, 'Yes, yes, we recall. We'll be quiet when the coach talks'.

This answer, which reflects the idea that being organized in quiet is boring, has become Eric's *thing*. With it, he answers correctly, but makes a bold counter-performance against the adults by ironically interrupting to share the rule against interrupting. He is not alone. He often receives praise for his courage and laughter for his cunning. As we announce that we will *play* handball, Eric's contrarian efforts are joined by a couple of boys:

'Handball is not play!' Someone growls.

'Well, OK, let's start with some basketball for warm-ups!' We say with enthusiasm.

'Basketball is BORING!' A couple kids holler.

During game time, the children are usually more responsive to the positive cult and the enactment of organized autotelic play. With their parents in the stands, the scene is more formal than practices and the kids can put on a *show* for their parents; displaying their skills and how much they enjoy sports. However, Eric plays a different game. On the court midway into the first half, he casts a bored look at his coaches. Giving no reason, he asks us to make a substitution. He wants out.

'Don't you want to play?' I ask. 'You do not have to play. You know that?' After all, participation in play is, in theory (Huizinga, [1938] 1950) and by Norwegian children's sports law (St meld.26, 2011–2012), voluntary.

Eric throws his head back and sighs, '*Ye-e-es*, I know. I do want to play. I don't *really* want to be substituted'.

Then why do you ask? The other boys want to play. Next time you ask, you can take a seat and wait until it is your time again.

Eric knows that the coaches make sure all boys get the same amount of playing time. He turns his back to the bench and returns to defence, yelling at the opposing attackers: 'Shoot, shoot, shoot!'

I stretch my arms out, and with some resignation, say, 'Eric, don't do that'.

After the game, Coach Teddy tells me his team 'laid down on the court. They all flat out refused to play'. His diplomatic skills were tested, he says, laughing nonetheless.

At games, establishing the negative cult was easier, but achieving a shared conception of the positive cult was still difficult given its indeterminacy. Through social performances, kids could break the positive cult's prospect for a sacred pure synchronizing of team movements and the forming of a community in organized autotelic play. By calling out sports as not-play, or in dramatically objecting to play, the counter-performers filtered sacred impure notions of a disagreeable activity organized by controlling adults through the play-codes. They were right, too. Sports are not ideal-typical creative play (Huizinga, [1938] 1950), but involve playing together in rulebound games (Mead, [1934] 2015). Typically, it was players who had not mastered the game, or who usually dominated but were hindered by skilled opponents, that protested. They claimed their 'right to complain about a game that does not pay its way in immediate pleasure' (Goffman, 1961: 17) and dramatically showed us their displeasure in not realizing a sporting self within a group (Corte, 2022) carrying out sports practices, goals and solidarities. The play element in sports allows us to express different viewpoints: that sounds like play, or not; this feels like play, or not. In Norwegian children's sports reverberating 'principle commitments' to universal inclusion, the code play versus non-play enables an acceptable refusal not to play as boundaries are drawn in the positive cult. Belonging and group identity are held by those who enact play. Skill assessments by coaches and players – possibly repressive social barriers – are glossed over. Children who do not find play in a sport look for other sporting options or quit sports altogether.

### *Successful positive cult*

The positive cult is the sum of the transfigured collective forces made of the 'ideas and feelings' that a community awakens in us (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 327). When bodies join in rhythmic movements, we feel its contagion as an amplified emotional energy, a social electricity (Collins, 2004; Corte, 2022). The positive cult's action pattern lets us reach a socially electrified sport, but only with dramaturgical efforts in social performance. Regardless of how inclined we may otherwise be to feel invested in sports we must dramatize, imitate, and show that chasing sport's uncertain outcomes and emotion directives (Goffman, 1959, 1961) involve an 'authentic' autotelic play that keeps sacred impure culture at a distance.

While the longer game sequences, momentum shifts, and intensity of elite and skilled youth sports are rare, ritual-like experiences occur in children's sports, too. In my fourth season with the team, the boys are turning 11 years old. We have regularly played (a kind version of) dodgeball for warmups, but after introducing the game of touch handball [Stanghåndball] to the kids' great joy, we coaches make a bold move to substitute the former for the latter. The announcement unleashes pandemonium. Eighteen boys respond as if with one thought and one voice.

'But why?' Eric exclaims as if someone has robbed him of his Saturday candy.

'Because you all told us you enjoyed it,' Teddy answers.

'We did, but only replacing something else, something boring. Not substituting dodgeball,' Mark replies, completely beside himself.

'How many of you would preferer dodgeball on Wednesdays?' I ask them. Eighteen hands shoot to the air; four players don't vote. Coach Teddy and I cannot hold back our laughs. 'OK, next Wednesday dodgeball is back. *It's a promise*. But today let's just try out touch handball'.

The boys are divided into two teams that will compete in bringing the ball from their own half of the court, all the way across the midcourt line, to the opposition's goal. No shots at the goal are allowed. Players must bring the ball close to the goalposts and then touch one of three posts with the ball. Everyone on the attacking team must cross the midcourt line and stand inside the defenders' half of the court. No ball hogs, we are not allowed to dribble the ball. After three steps, you must pass the ball. Everyone joins in. Adults too.

A 15-min warm-up was planned, but the plot collapses as we immerse in a fast-paced story and 20-min contest where everyone, in ebbs and flows, wash back and forth over the 40-m-long court. On the attack, Mark gets the ball close to the goalposts. Almost like a dog shaking off water, he spins around to get away from Derick who is thrown to the side. Mark cuts towards the goal to place the ball on a post, but smacks into my body. I stop him and gently move him in the opposite direction, forcing him to pass the ball. Eric makes the catch, attacks – two quick steps – then passes the ball on to Darren, who gets a clear path to the goalpost. ‘YES!’ his team hollers. Adding a ‘neener neener’ at the defense. ‘Awesome!’ I cheer while gasping for air and transitioning to offence. Already picking up pace, I receive the ball from Trevor, pass it seamlessly on to the midfield where Peter is at the ready. Facing me, but with his body directed at the opposition’s goal, Peter quickly turns to scan the court, picking up on others’ synchronic pacing in the right direction. No ball hogs. Three steps. The ball is moved out on the flank where Tim, in a good position to read the court passes it on closer to the goal. Theon catches, but is forced by the defense to look for help in the second wave of attackers breaking onwards behind him. The defense is outsmarted as the ball zips in a triangular path from Theon via Trevor to Peter. Score.

We are working up a sweat. This rarely happens. Time flies as we are drawn together in a shared movement. The game directive – that everyone must cross the midcourt line – literally forces us into a bodily rhythm where everyone synchronizes to run at least 20 m back and forth in each play sequence. Regardless of the intent and effort of the individual, these movements create emotionally energized (Corte, 2022; Collins, 2004; Durkheim, [1912] 1995; Turner, 2012) starts, climaxes and perpetual resolutions (DeLand, 2018, 2022): spin moves, passes and cheers. Our rhythm is experiential proof that an ‘organic psychobiological process’ is fending off irrelevant culture (Goffman, 1961). The sum of individual efforts in the social performance of autotelic play has imbued our cult with the collective energy to transform everyday dramaturgies into ritual-like sports: two teams moving in a rhythmic duet. The social sport performance thus generates a social electricity protecting our imitation of autotelic play and feeds back an energy that is more than what we expected (Corte, 2022: 124).

Yet the ambiguity of play is not eliminated. Everyone gathers and I loudly proclaim.

‘What a fantastic effort you all! Touch handball is the world’s best warm-up! Right?’ Coach Teddy seizes the opportunity to capitalize on the moment. ‘What we just did guys is so much better in terms of playing handball and becoming a team than dodgeball is’. Teddy speaks for all coaches. Yet, instantly, our transformation of a routine practice session into a ritual-like moment fragments and a sense of mundanity re-emerges. We are still within the negative cult, but our brief re-fusion of sports with autotelic play shatters and the cult’s pathways re-directs us to see sport as constrained play once more. Eleven-year-old Derick kindly wants to help us understand, from a child’s perspective, the effort taken to create ritual-like sports:

Trygve, you must understand, it’s not that touch handball is not fun. It’s more fun than a lot of other stuff. We just really love dodgeball.

Mark and Derick look at their coaches with fearful eyes, as if they are afraid that the adults’ joy in sports will trump their own desires for dodgeball, for play. Sports not only act on the minds of participants, but aesthetically transform and redefine play itself. The focused gathering arising from a social performance can be electric, but not everyone enjoys this energy the same way. The dramaturgical pathways of the cult are therefore, undeniably, both inhibiting and invigorating as they delineate specific identities and establish boundaries to non-sport activities and free play. Mark’s effort in the dramaturgy of sports was vast. Few people are willing to invest like he does. Not everyone ran the full court. Some kids settled around the midcourt line. But not even Mark was willing to make his investment unconditionally.

Typical to situational meaning-making, ritual-like meaning-making is multidimensional and volatile. When we carry out a social performance of the cult and bodies synchronize on its pathways, we are expending a great deal of dramaturgical effort. The boys of this ethnography show us that we can join

in ritual-like social performances without even liking its movements, or at least without really wanting to expend the effort. Successful sports might look like autotelic play, but it is a social performance: authentic to some, fake to others, orchestrating body movements and, to the distant onlooker, looking like a ritual. When the children's bodies break out of the ritual-like rhythms, the 'sport ritual' halts, but another dimension of their play emerges. Given a choice, the kids make democracy a ritual-like process in which they can exercise their rights to be heard and have the adults practice their 'principal commitment' to listen. Accordingly, it is not simply rules that regulate civilized children's sports. We must perform civility. In my team, symbolics of play were making and breaking ritual-like processes as autotelic and democratic.

'When will we play dodgeball?' Tim asks, as if he is hoping there is still time.

To his great disappointment, 'next Wednesday. I promise.'

## Conclusion

In a complex and fragmented modernity, our transforming of everyday dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) to ritual (Durkheim, [1912] 1995) and back is contingent on social performances (Alexander, 2004). While ritual-like moments or highly successful social performances are shorter lived today, they nonetheless remains central in social life.

I have exposed ritual-like meaning-making as demanding of our dramaturgical effort to bring meanings and action together on the pathways of the cult. To reach a collaborative sequence of action (Fine and Corte, 2017) we must *perpetually work* through enactments and voices expressing different viewpoints (Hartmann et al., 2022; Malacarne, 2021; Smith, 2008; Spillman, 2020). Macro-cultural codes must be collaboratively *worked into* micro scripts (DeLand, 2018; Fine, 1987, 2015; Geertz, 1973; Jijon, 2015; Klima, 2022) in ways deepening our emotions and fueling us with the energy to realize ourselves within the encounter (Collins, 2004; Corte, 2022; DeLand, 2022). My ethnography of children's sports shows that transient ritual-like action and interaction can be accomplished if we expend this dramaturgical effort via the structural modality of the cult and accept the meanings imbued in its pathways.

This article reveals the cult as a cultural structure we can use and manoeuvre to create ritual-like moments. By making the cult a performative serving to shape interactions, the negative and the positive cult enable (but do not promise) our transformation of mundanity into a ritual. The cult is both a pathway and an obstacle. We must actively separate sports from its surroundings and activate its interactional membrane (Goffman, 1961). Separation involves painful privations (negative cult). A heightened concentration and physical energy (positive cult) awakening the community in us demands our careful keeping apart of sacred pure from sacred impure meanings. My interlocutors did not speak of the cult, but they established and broke it by calling out the team's authenticity or falsity, its pleasures or discomforts. What is more, we felt its social electricity and short circuit, the ways it establishes group identities and boundaries of inclusion and whether we could realize our autotelic selves within the team.

Children's sports are good fodder for thinking about rituals. We tend to forget how much effort it takes to create meaningful sports as we witness high-profile athletes moving seamlessly on standardized action templates. To generate ritual-like sports, we must convince each other, true or false, that we are transforming mundanity into sports by doing 'autotelic' play. Yet, if we overlook the ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and of the ritual (Kurakin, 2015), we are unable to grasp the collaborative transformation processes at the heart of sports. In ethnographically capturing the world-building of sports, our use of binary codes to comment, monitor and direct shared action sequences is elucidated. In Norwegian children's sports, play is a cultural force allowing us to immerse in games and 'commit in principle' to democratic ideals of a mass sports for all. Through the democratic voices and wishes of the kids in this ethnography, the two-sided language of play – as a state of being and as a rhetorical code – is revealed. As we drew the cult's boundaries to energize and sustain fun in games, those who did not immerse in the group's play called out its immediate failure. Among our many options, rulebound

skill acquisition and hard work could be coded as play or fun. It can be exhausting and boring, too. Both options, I have shown, can not only (re)direct a team's actions, but are also sources of great performative satisfaction in expressing one's different points of view.

To the study of rituals, I contribute a multidimensional approach accounting for structural volatility and social diversity. I have used sports to expose this complexity of modern rituals and to theorize the heightened intensity, or transient social electricity, as ritual-like. Contemporary sports are contradictory, not fully consistent; full of disagreements and individual voices, not of consensus and cultural dopes; contingent on highly successful performances, not caused by a simple ritual causality. Sports live and die on the ritual pathways of the cult and with our dramaturgical efforts to play. This is a difficult balancing act, as the pathways to the ritual-like both constrict and allow our boundaries of integration and social criticism.


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