Leadership in Community Sport: Searching for Meaning

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Introduction

Leadership in sport as in any other organisational context is commonly understood to be the ability to motivate and guide an individual or a group toward a specific outcome (Chelleadurai, 1985). Leaders take their athletes to destinations they might otherwise not be able (or wish) to reach. As the theoretical and empirical study of leadership has progressed in the 20th Century, the focus has been predominantly on how the leader can and should ‘manipulate’ the environment around the athlete in order to motivate efficient, effective, and productive behaviour. To accomplish this desired end, a variety of strategies have been proposed from simple quid pro quo exchanges of salary/funding and/or benefits (e.g., playing time) for the athlete’s labour, loss of freedom, and adherence to supervision (Ouchi, 1980), to more subtle yet powerful and complex approaches that establish congruency between athlete and team values (e.g., Schien, 1990; Burns, 1978; Bass, 1980; Malloy & Taylor, 1999). These strategies aim to modify the environment to provide reinforcement for preferred behaviour. Consider the following statements in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Statements based in behaviourism.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. If I am winning, I receive certain benefits;</td>
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<td>2. If I am losing, these benefits are taken away;</td>
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<td>3. If I am a team-player (i.e. I buy into team values), I am accepted by the group who, for all intent and purpose, have become my pseudo family due to the demands of the sport (e.g., time away from biological family); and</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. If I am not a team player (i.e. if I do not internalise team values,) then I am ostracised.</td>
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The familiar theme to each of these examples is behavioural conditioning.

Behaviourism

Behaviourism seeks to modify the environment in order to reinforce a desired response by administering either positive or negative reinforcement (Skinner, 1971). For example, the rat in the cage is provided food or electrical shock based upon its success or failure to perform the desired behaviour. Eventually it ‘learns’ to avoid the shock and displays the programmed movement. The student receives
good marks for ‘correct’ responses to questions; the child receives dessert if vegetables are eaten, and the athlete receives positive reward for following the guidance of the coach. The common denominator is that in each case, behaviour is programmed and free-will is not acknowledged. In extreme behavioural theory, free-will is rejected outright (Skinner, 1971). Placed into a team context, if free-will is an illusion and behaviour is controllable based upon reward and punishment structures, then teams can be controlled and behaviour predicted. The outcome is that the player becomes an agent of the team and the team then runs efficiently and effectively. The Path-Goal Model of Leadership (House, 1971), which is based in behaviourism, continues to be used extensively in sport management literature (e.g., Chelladurai, 1985; Quarterman, Li, & Park, 2007) is a case in point. House (1971) states that the ‘… motivational functions of the leader consist of increasing the number and kinds of personal pay-offs to subordinates for work-goal attainment’ (p. 85). Quarterman et al. (2007) state that the ‘primary goal of leadership is to exert influence on individual and group behaviours, either toward the leader’s goals or toward the organization’s goals’ (p. 337). The outcome of this leadership ontology is a team culture that is efficient, effective, and productive - the desired end-state for all organisational entities that are teleologically oriented.

Teleology

Teleology is a philosophical approach that argues all things can best be explained in terms of ends, aims, intentions, or purposes. The purpose of a knife is to cut well; the purpose of a paddle is to propel a canoe; the purpose of a stopwatch is to display accurate time. Specifically in an ethical context, the purpose of our moral behaviour is to realise positive outcomes or consequences of action (i.e. goodness) as opposed to the means or process or duties of action (Flew, 1979).

Teleology is the underlying ontology of any team which is, by definition and necessity, a goal-oriented phenomenon because in order to survive, it cannot be otherwise - it must establish and reach its goals or fail. With regard to teleological thinking, there are a number of ways in which it manifests itself in teams. It can be oriented toward the player or coach ‘good’ (hedonism), toward the team’s ‘goodness’ itself (local-utilitarianism), or toward the ‘good’ of the commonweal (cosmopolitan-utilitarianism) such as the good of the sport in general (see Victor & Cullen, 1987; Malloy & Agarwal, 2001). In each case the greatest good or pleasure and the avoidance of pain (for the player or team) is sought. The age old debate is what constitutes the ‘good’. In general, organisational goodness has been traditionally measured in terms of ‘organisational goals’ reached and employee goodness is measured predominantly in terms of financial reward, status, and security.

1 While pleasures of a physical nature have been a part of this debate, most hedonists and utilitarians agree that there is a hierarchy of pleasures from the physical to the intellectual and that the contemplative pleasures are superior. Plato makes this point clear in a variety of dialogues, from the Republic in which the good is revealed through conceptual enlightenment from the “Cave” to the Phaedrus in which Socrates expounds on the beauty and love of the soul as opposed to the body.
Consider sport organisations specifically. Team happiness is reflected in the ratio of games won to games lost; the rise in participation rates; securing funding from federal, provincial, municipal, or private sources. Individual happiness for players (contingent on the level of competition) is generally thought to rest on financial security (e.g., sponsorship), enjoyable playing conditions, etc. This scenario is admittedly oversimplified however; the point is that most would see nothing out of the ordinary with this generalisation (Hodgkinson, 1996). We work or participate in a behavioural world directed by a teleological philosophical mind-set (see Figure 1) - Is there a problem? Is there a viable solution? Could there be another dimension?

![Figure 1. Teleology](image)

To recap, our current leadership environment is one in which we employ a behavioural strategy to reward positive behaviour that will lead to players’ and team’s happiness. Implicit in this stimulus-response strategy is the ontological view that the player does not possess free-will (and thus theoretically cannot be held responsible for actions) and that he or she assumes the role of agent of the team. This is the view taken by Ross (1994) who suggests the academic study of sport in general (e.g., kinesiology) perceives the athlete as *homo mechanicus*\(^2\). If this ontological perception is the correct one, then we have no problem and no radical change is needed. Therefore the coach, athlete, and employee require external stimulus to succeed (see Table 1). If however this view of the essence of humanity is incomplete, then we do have a problem.

**A Missing Dimension?**

The existentialists argue that we are more than the outcome of biology and the intentional or unintentional programming of society. They argue that fundamentally

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\(^2\) ‘Human as a machine’

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we are beings with free-will and that we create who we are ontologically as opposed to being determined by external forces (Sartre, 1957; DeSensi & Malloy, 2007). Because they object to the notion of biological, social, and divine determinism, they contend that meaning in life (and sport) is not given or handed down but discovered by each individual. It is the existential leader’s responsibility to facilitate the player’s self-discovery of meaning through sport (DeSensi & Malloy, 2007). In the following section, meaning in work will be discussed followed by the presentation of a strategy for leadership in sport.

Meaning in Work

The term ‘meaning’ is, on the surface, clear enough, however when used in the broad context of one’s life, it can become difficult to pinpoint. This is the case because what is meaningful to one person is meaningless to another; in the same way as what is beautiful to one person may not be beautiful to someone else (i.e. beauty lies in the ‘in the eyes of the beholder’). Meaning is unique to each person and cannot be imposed, but rather must be drawn out either by the individual or by a careful inquisitor. In the interests of this paper, it may be helpful to define meaning as that which gives or contributes to giving your life purpose. Aristotle (1992) would argue in a similar fashion that what is meaningful is that which contributes to the individual reaching his or her potential – to flourish (i.e. eudaimonia). While Aristotle places emphasis upon intellectual flourishing, he recognises that physical and social flourishing is also necessary to be a complete human. Therefore meaning is obtainable in a variety of things we do from work, sport, music, gardening, to prayer. Having said this, the context of meaning is not only based upon the individual, but can be perceived as multilayered. Swami Vividishananda wrote the following: ‘... for the sake of the family sacrifice the individual; for the sake of the nation, sacrifice the community; for the sake of the world, sacrifice the nation; and for the sake of the individual soul, sacrifice the whole world’.

Taking this to heart, it can be argued that meaning can be perceived as participating in at least three of the following major spheres of influence:

- Meaning in the context of the organisation.
- Meaning in the context of society-at-large.
- Meaning in the context of the individual’s essence.

Meaning in the organisation

Karl Marx (1906) was the first to discuss the idea that, as a function of industrialisation, the worker became aesthetically separated from the output of his or her labour. For example, a cabinetmaker who once made the cabinet in its totality, now makes the knobs, another makes the drawers, and yet another makes the shell. These three

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individuals may not even see the finished product because someone else paints it, someone else advertises it, and a salesperson sells it. Granted, this is a more efficient and effective means to produce cabinets (i.e. it leads to more cabinets being made and more financial reward for the capital investor), however it leaves the individual carpenter with precious little with which to identify the purpose of his or her work - knobs.

The nature of work and sport is different for all of us, however, we can identify with the knob-maker and we can understand the feeling of futility and the forced lack of creativity that the system places before us. Typically we accept our fate and hope we live long enough and make enough money to retire. We may even become avid purchasers and pushers of lottery tickets in order to exit work early and pursue something that we believe will give us more meaning or will provide us with enough pleasure that we won’t have to worry about work or philosophy ever again (Stearns & Borna, 1995). We think this way because we do not see the meaning in work - we see it as meaningless toil (Rinehart, 1987; Vivekananda, 1999). So what do we do?

The task of the leader is to facilitate organisational members’ awareness of the possibility of meaning in and through their work. This awareness is a function of an explicit dialogue with individuals regarding the influence that work can have on them personally and the impact that work has on the greater good for the organisation and society-at-large. Such a dialogue cannot be a ‘one-off’ but must become part of the culture of the organisation – a meaning-organisation.

**Meaning for society-at-large**

It is one thing to understand how what you do contributes to the overall functioning of the organisation, but do you understand how the organisation’s meaning fits in to the greater good for society? For some of us, this purpose is clear, for others, it is more difficult to imagine the broader picture. Part of the reason for this lack of clarity, particularly in the world of business, is that we tend to be deeply motivated by the ‘numbers game’. Decisions are based on profitability - on ‘bottom-line’ that is easily quantifiable. Further, we have been led to believe that our labour is to be geared to the advantage of the shareholder - not the consumer or general public - and that the invisible hand of the market will eventually cleanse itself of the meaningless and profitless (*pareto optimality*).

Trouble arises of course when the focus of the organisation’s efforts becomes geared exclusively to the individual or to the organisation at the expense of the greater good. For example, the recent actions of the American company, Enron, displays how a few individuals in pursuit of material wealth can have lasting negative impact upon a great number of people (e.g., in this case - shareholders losing life’s savings). When a business will break the law to accumulate profit for shareholders, when an HMO (Health Management

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4 *Pareto optimality* is a situation which exists when economic resources and output have been allocated in such a way that no one can be made better off without sacrificing the well being of at least one person. See, http://www.economyprofessor.com/economictheories/pareto-optimality.phpn.
Organisation in the USA) will withhold service or necessary treatment or drugs to reduce costs, when a politician fails to keep a campaign promise, and when an athlete or coach attempts to win at-all-cost, the public good is sacrificed and the organisation’s purpose has been cut short of greater meaning.

In contrast, the individual who is able to see that his or her labour, through the organisation, can be connected, however remotely, with a greater sense of purpose, will find this work purposeful and satisfying. Work will have greater meaning than simply the augmentation of the organisation itself or the profit share of an unknown investor. The organisation becomes a means through which this greater good is realised and it is this greater good that drives the individual to be successful.

Meaning for the individual

Recognition. Ultimately, the journey ends (or starts) at personal meaning and the notion that some sense of meaning can be found in any work context. This meaning can be realised if two conditions are met. The first is that there is an awareness of the potential for meaning. Like any problem-solving model, recognition and awareness is the first step. The second condition is that there is an ability and willingness to explore, what Heidegger (1966) called, the meditative aspect of thinking which ‘... demands of us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all’ (p. 53).

Awareness. It is quite conceivable that many go through their lives without an awareness of purpose or meaning. As a result these individuals – these legions of individuals - suffer from periodic or constant existential anxiety (i.e. that life has no purpose) and never discover the source of this meaning vacuum (Frankl, 2006). Many turn to a variety of distractions to overcome this feeling of life’s absurdity – some distractions are more hurtful than others (drugs, alcohol, affairs, etc.). Regardless, the sense of meaninglessness for many is a genuine cause of unhappiness and depression and, for those unaware of the cause of this discontent, it is a profound source of frustration. *I am depressed and I just don’t know why*. Thus the first stage of meaningful work is ensuring that the employee is aware that there is indeed meaning out there to be had regardless of the situation or nature of work. Specifically, Frankl (1978) states that meaning can be realised through what we do or give through our creative work, what we take from our experiences and relationships, and how we face unavoidable suffering. Let’s consider each.

5 Viktor Frankl was an acclaimed existential psychologist who believed that the primary will in humans was not the will to pleasure (Freud) or power (Adler) but the will to meaning. The therapy based on this perspective is called logotherapy (logos is the Greek term for meaning). Frankl spent years in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War and this traumatic experience gave him first hand knowledge of the power of the will to meaning to define one’s true essence. He also contended that much of human depression and angst is a function of a loss or unawareness of life’s meaning and logotherapy could be instrumental in revealing meaning to those who suffer from this existential vacuum or anxiety. Frankl acknowledged that a sense of meaninglessness is not the only cause of depression and did not suggest that an awareness of meaning in one’s life will necessarily solve the pathology of all forms of anxiety - only those related to existential anxiety.

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Clearly meaning through *what we do* has direct implications for us in our work. Does our work allow us to express ourselves either in terms of a creative product or a self-chosen commitment to duty? For example, in the *Bhagavad-Gita* a form of prayer to Krishna is termed ‘Karma-Yoga’. While there are contemplative forms of prayer open to some with particular dispositions, to the men or women of action, Karma-Yoga allows them to serve Krishna through their work - their action. In other words, work has meaning because it takes the form of worship. Duty in a secular context can also be realised particularly if the employee sees that his or her job contributes to some greater good, something beyond themselves (‘self-transcendence’ as Frankl calls it) - a purpose for societal good. For example, in a current study of the perception of meaning among an international group of nurses (Malloy, 2007), when asked about meaningful work, the more senior nurses focused their comments on the care of the patient and their service to the public as motivational and meaningful. In contrast, they lamented the attitude of recent graduates from nursing schools who fail to see the broader meaning of nursing in favour of their adherence to union restrictions and hospital regulations. The perception among these senior nurses was that they found their work meaningful - a calling - but their younger colleagues were thought to perceive nursing simply as a job and nothing more.

Our *relationships and experiences* is the second manner in which meaning in life can be found. This aspect also pertains to work as our organisational life is never solitary - we are always involved with co-workers, client’s patients, students, etc. If we perceive each other as beings in the pursuit of meaning, then these relationships we form become necessarily deeper and meaningful. If as a leader I believe that it is part of my role to foster this meaning, then my relationship with the follower will be much different than if I perceive the follower simply as a worker, a student, or an athlete - *homo mechanicus!* Further, the experiences we have through work can provide us with a sense of growth, maturity, and insight - all sources of meaning.

Finally, the *attitude one chooses* in the face of unavoidable suffering is presented by Frankl as perhaps the most salient catalyst to meaning. This is one of the reasons why Frankl’s work is not part of mainstream therapy in the 21st century. It appears to have been reserved as a corrective for the more dramatic forms of existential anxiety such as suicide, post traumatic stress, and the extremes of depression, neuroses, and human misery (e.g., the Nazi death camps). Arguably, we suffer each day in subtle ways. We suffer as athletes when we lose, we suffer as students when we fail to achieve necessary grades for university entrance, we suffer as parents when our children are sad, and we suffer as organisational members when we lose a sale or contract, or our boss is displeased with our performance. We have the freedom, so argue the existentialists, to choose the manner in how we face these major and

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6 Calvinism shares a similar view of the purpose of work.

7 It is important to note that this was the collective ‘opinion’ of this group senior nurses and not necessarily fact. It may well be the case that the junior nurses do find their work meaningful or they may eventually find it meaningful once they have established themselves in the profession.
minor forms of suffering - we can lose heart and the will to continue in the face of adversity or we can face suffering nobly. Nietzsche’s famous statement ‘What does not destroy me, makes me stronger’ (Nietzsche (1865/1962), p. 467) expresses this sentiment exactly; as does the nobility of Boethuis in his last days before execution at the hands of King Theoderic⁸. We can accept criticism and we can withstand cruelty. Buddhist teaching offers an interesting approach to such abuse and cruelty (Carroll, 2004). The recipient of cruelty can thank the perpetrator for providing an opportunity to demonstrate our inner strength that we all have at our disposal. For example, the spouse can thank the cheating partner for disloyalty because it has forced an attitude of strength in life and reflection on what meaning is yet to be found - including the potential meaningful love of another in the future (see Table 2 for a summary of Frankl’s sources of meaning).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things we do</th>
<th>Relationships we have</th>
<th>Attitude toward suffering</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative outlet in:</td>
<td>Recognising the bonds we establish with:</td>
<td>Outlook we choose in the face of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Performance of a skill</td>
<td>• Co-workers</td>
<td>• Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Executing and designing strategy</td>
<td>• Coaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaching skill</td>
<td>• Athletes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Establishing goals</td>
<td>• Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leading others to team goals and to personal goals</td>
<td>• Volunteers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Leading others to their own sense of meaning¹</td>
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The willingness to explore

Next we turn to the willingness of the individual to explore their sense of imagination in order to perceive life and meaning through different lenses. Crumbaugh (1988) provided an interesting metaphor for imagining one’s life. He suggested that it is like a jigsaw puzzle in which certain pieces are missing. These absent pieces represent what is missing in your life and, of course, we focus on what is not there rather than the incomplete picture we can see, and the meaning we could have if

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⁸ Boethuis wrote the famous treatise “The Consolations of Philosophy” (523/1999) while he was under house arrest in Ravenna. The book outlines the need to renounce earthly ‘goods’ in order to prepare for a Platonic “Good” in Heaven.

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only we were able to step back and view it through a broader lens. This is what Heidegger (1966) refers to when he speaks of the meditative component of our thinking - the one with which most have lost touch. As we look out the window we can see a tree and our exclusive focus is on the tree - its qualities, its usefulness, its potential for carpentry, etc. This is the calculative thinker’s perspective. The meditative thinker can go beyond this immediate sense of the tree’s qualities and its potential and see the tree against the backdrop of the horizon or the rest of the forest - same tree, different perspective. Frankl (1978) uses the example of objects and their shadows to demonstrate this point. Light held from above a cylinder casts a circular shadow; light held beside the same cylinder casts a rectangular shadow - same object, different perception. The point being made is that for the individual to be able to discover personal meaning, he or she must be able to view the same situation (i.e. one’s life thus far) from a different perspective. Going back to Crumbaugh’s metaphor of the puzzle, you may never find those missing pieces for which you search, however, it is possible to see a sense of totality - a sense of meaning through the pieces that you do have and do understand.

The Role of the Leader

The leader cannot impose meaning. He or she can help the follower to open themselves up to the possibility of meaningful work and a meaningful existence by helping the individual be aware of meaning through work and by assisting him or her to imagine their work and their life differently. This can be accomplished if, and only if, work is perceived as a means through which meaning is found. As long as we continue to perceive work as nothing more than a source of salary and security, it will continue to be perceived as meaningless by the vast majority of the employed (Rinehart, 1987).

Meaning, Leadership and Sport

If work is perceived by most to be the means with which we acquire money and security with no greater purpose, does sport fare any better than a meaningless physical distraction? Is sport really perceived to be ‘More than a game’ (the motto of Sasksport in the Province of Saskatchewan)? According to a recent poll, sport is thought to be a vehicle toward the acquisition of certain preferred values (Decima, 2002). It was found that

… community-level sports are seen to promote a number of positive values in youth, with “teamwork” and “commitment to a goal or purpose” at the

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9 It must be stated that the extent to which this way of thinking is accepted by organisational members is in direct proportion to the trust in and role-modelling by the leader. Without trust and a habitual demonstration that meaning is a fundamental aspect of work and the organisational culture, members are unlikely to take this seriously and view it as another human resource department strategy to increase work efficiency and productivity.

10 The administrative body for the Federation of Provincial Sport Governing Bodies. http://www.sasksport.sk.ca/simtag.php

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top of the list. The public also believes sport promotes such values as “hard work”, “striving for excellence”, “fair play”, “courage to try new things” and “respect for others.” There is notably less agreement, however, on the contribution of sports in promoting “honesty” (p. 3).

While this is a laudable function for sport, what are we doing specifically to foster these particular values or a more fundamental awareness of meaning? The short answer is nothing. There is an ethics component in the National Coaching Certification Program of Canada (NCCP) training and this may be a useful tool in making ethical choices and fostering awareness of concepts such as fair play. However, there is no explicit focus on revealing the possibilities of sport as a vehicle for meaning in the coaches’ or athletes’ lives - a much broader sphere than ethical concerns. At best we assume it is implicit. However, Frankl (2000) argues that the will to meaning is latent and requires specific and intentional discovery. This implies that meaning cannot be foisted on an employee or athlete; it must come from the individual himself or herself. However, this does not imply that the leader stands idly waiting for this self-discovery to occur. The role of the leader becomes that of the Socratic inquisitor who never imparts knowledge but asks questions to reveal existing yet hidden knowledge. Simply put, we rarely think about the extent to which our daily activities hold meaning for us. We go through the motions of the ‘everyday’ (Sartre, 1957) without consideration of their impact on our grander scheme of life. It is not that we haven’t the capability; we simple haven’t the inclination to think in these terms. Heidegger (1966) argues that we
are in a *flight from thinking* in this sort of ‘meditative’ fashion because we are in a rush to think in a more pragmatic or calculative mode. Placed in the context of sport, we are in a rush to accumulate and analyse statistics or to further enhance technologies or systems to improve skills and performance and rarely if ever consider the ‘so what’ question (i.e. Is this meaningful, and if so how and why?). Therefore it is the leader’s responsibility to help us broaden our focus to consider meaning in addition to our penchant for the realm of pragmatism. In Figure 2 a leadership model is described that may assist the leader in opening up a dialogue with individuals.

Recognition or awareness that there is meaning to be discovered is the first stage in this process. The leader’s goal here is to open a dialogue with the individual to raise awareness that there may be something beyond the day-to-day existence (i.e. going through the motions of school, sport, and work) that may lead to an inspired will to action. The second stage is the raised awareness of the potential contexts in which meaning can be found. Does the creative aspect of teaching or strategy planning appeal to the individual; or is it the relationships formed, and the giving of oneself to the other, the source of inspiration, purpose, or meaning? It may also be to opportunity to express oneself in the face of disappointment that leads to a sense of purpose - a positive defining moment in one’s life. Once the individual is aware that life, work, or sport has potential to be meaningful, it then becomes the leader’s task to foster philosophical imagination. This implies that the individual, comfortable in a calculative world of the ‘everyday’, is encouraged to seek a deeper sense of purpose in his or her activities in order to determine if these pursuits are, or can be, made to be a medium for fulfilment or *meaning-events*.

Let’s look at an example. Gaelan is a long distance runner. In order to compete, he must log a certain number of kilometres each week which he does with great commitment. When asked why he pushes himself to such an extreme physical and mental limit, he states that without this intensity, he would not be a competitive athlete. When asked why this is important, he hesitates and is at a loss. However, upon a guided reflection with his coach, Gaelan realises that the dedication he exhibits as a runner is a reflection of his broader personality (i.e. an individual who sets and achieves high standards). He also realises that his choice of sport is also revealing as its very individuality and loneliness is a source of inspiration and inner authentic strength that he carries with him in his daily routine. Thus, for Gaelan, he now recognises that running is much more than simply an activity to improve his cardio-vascular potential, it is in fact a highly philosophically important manifestation of who he is as an individual. In other words, running is meaningful to him – a *meaning-event*.

The final stage in this model is meaning-into-action. This implies that the individual who now has a greater sense of purpose (or in contrast has found that the activity is *not* a source of meaning) may invoke this new awareness to his or her work or sport setting to more fully engage. The individual now sees the activity through a more comprehensive lens – one that is physically, socially, and philosophical robust.

*What is meaningful* is of course the ultimate question and there are as many answers...
as there are individuals bold enough to ask themselves the question. The task, of the leader is not to impute meaning but to help reveal it. The leader is a midwife as Socrates believed, and each one of us is pregnant with meaning and in need of birthing. If one of the goals of human existence is to flourish as Aristotle (1992) has argued, then experiencing meaning in our daily actions and projects is most important to the individual; and assisting in the realisation of meaning is arguably the most salient role a leader has to offer.

Conclusion

‘If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how’


Sport has often been considered a microcosm of life. In short intense seasons and careers, participants experience a gamut of pains, pleasures, and stresses that accompany all athletic endeavours in its many facets. These challenges are physical, emotional, intellectual, and interpersonal and we have explored them for millennia11 in our effort to better design performances, programmes, and the overall administration of sport. Yet we have paid little or no attention to what underlies all of this activity - meaning. We may from time to time - perhaps as we stroll through a park, skate on a pond, or climb a mountain - privately consider what life’s meaning may be for us, but we rarely translate this meditative thinking into the context of work or sport; the environment or system in which we work or perform does not foster this sense of inquiry. This may be a function of our adoption of administrative and coaching theories based on calculative teleological behaviourism. Is this necessarily the only way in which we can do sport?

This paper is a first attempt12 to raise awareness of the will to meaning as a fundamental aspect of the individual involved in sport. As members of this dynamic community in myriad roles, we have perennially expected so much from sport. It entertains us, keeps us healthy, encourages friendship, represents our cultural and political systems, and somehow builds our character. It also can provide us with a sense of meaningfulness but this remains latent or submerged and is rarely brought to the surface of our psyche despite its fundamentality. In this paper, the argument has been put forward that this latency of meaning needs to become explicit and this discovery ought to be the primary role of leadership. Wilson (2008) echoes this point in his critique of American culture of ‘happiness’ states the following:

Ensoconned in their solipsistic silos, these American happy types are hopelessly frustrated because they’re trying desperately for security in

11 For example, Plato (1956) discusses the importance of adhering to expert advice with regard to athletic training in the Crito (45D-47C).

12 It must be noted that Terry Orlick of the University of Ottawa has employed Frankl’s technique of paradoxical intention in an effort to assist athletes with competition anxiety. However, this work, to the best of the author’s knowledge, was not directed to meaning in general or seeking meaning through sport.
an insecure world. They diligently attempt to control slippery time, but
the whizzing minutes always elude their grasp. Still, they try to convince
themselves that they are nonetheless catching and molding each tick
of the clock...Though they hold hard to their delusion, underneath,
unconsciously, they probably know that they have no more control over
their lives than a pebble in the rough currents of the river. (p. 27)

We know that, at the end of the day, the number of goals scored, games won,
or programmes developed will be forgotten by most, yet we continue to place
emphasis on these quantifiable measures that lead us toward the culture of efficiency,
effectiveness, productivity, and accountability. The difficulty with ‘meaning’ and its
incorporation into mainstream leadership behaviour is that it cannot be measured
and administrators, coaches, and government as well as corporate funding agencies
cannot demonstrate or be accountable for their ability to foster this most important
goal. In the calculative world in which we now live, this creates a problem for those
who believe in and rewarded by the need to measure and count. This is, of course,
not to suggest that we ought to stop ‘counting’ nor exploiting our technological
skills. In fact our modern world necessitates that we do continue to maximise our
scientific potential. Heidegger (1966) would counsel us to broaden our perspective
to accommodate both the calculative and meditative ways of thinking about life
in general and sport in particular. If ‘meaning’ defines the essence of the human
continually through one’s life, then opening up individuals to this reality is the most
important task of leadership. If this is true, our current perspective of leadership
needs to be reconsidered and the model described in this paper may provide a first
step. To close, the adage ‘it is not whether you win or lose but how you play the
game’ is incomplete from the perspective of ‘the will to meaning’. The following
modification completes this notion of meaning through sport: ‘It is not whether
you win or lose but how you play the game and the meaning you find though it
that ultimately gives sport purpose’.

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While this paper is focused on the athlete finding meaning, it is certainly the case that the leader has
the opportunity to find meaning through sport and through the process of leadership.

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