



Touching the Heart

Why Sport Matters

David Miller

Foreword by
Marcus Rashford



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CHAPTER ONE

DISCOVERING A SPORTING LIFE

The Greeks got it right. They knew a thing or two in 2700 BC – the inseparable link between humanity’s intellectual and physical instincts. The urge to chase a ball, throw a spear or win a race as distinctive then as in 2020. The psychology dates back to hunter-gatherer millennia, to our survival, and the basic urge is no different for the COVID-19 generation. We need, enjoy and thrive on challenge, essential to both mental and physical equilibrium. The assault of COVID-19 has been a demonstrable threat to our collective sanity by its imposition on exercise, fundamental to a healthy population. Sport provides dual benefit: fitness for the individual, while reducing national medical costs, alongside the entertainment which is provided by many professional sports. Football engages hundreds of thousands, whether amateur players or the professional game’s audience. The Coe–Ovett contest in Moscow’s Olympics embraced 23 million UK viewers. The Queen was riveted by Torvill and Dean four years later. The world has held its breath at three contemporary Olympic Games, spellbound by Usain Bolt’s sprinting treble-treble;

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elsewhere by Jonny Wilkinson's dropped goals and by Roger Federer's cross-court backhand.

Sport is different from most cultural activities in that almost everyone can be engaged, playing or watching. It is non-lingual: a Mexican can compete with a Russian, whether it's swimming or snooker, fencing or football, as long as they know the rules, and it is discipline which conditions sport – a mobile, unpredictable drama, a flexible art form, occasionally physically beautiful, and not to be scorned by intellectual snobs. Yet pause for a moment. Sport is also potentially a vehicle, in parallel with regular life, for helping us better to comprehend intellectual civic strategy within critical relationships, domestic or international: how humanity behaves collectively in crisis. There is a plausible correlation, with hindsight, of, say, the outcome of the blindside battle of Waterloo, Marshal Blucher's crucial Prussian flank attack – or the insane Peterloo massacre, or the contemporary Clapham Common demonstration police conflict – with the sporting sophistication of Hungary's football in the 1950s when England's centre-half captain Billy Wright was effectively left as a bystander in a 6-3 defeat, or Holland's jigsaw of the '70s, the epic technical *volte face* of Arthur Ashe's defeat of overwhelming favourite Jimmy Connors. Parliament might occasionally act more wisely if more male MPs played mixed doubles at tennis. Even sport itself is only latterly adapting to gender-awareness integration. In a mere two words, sport is *sensible* and *civilised*: a microcosm of life.

My mission here is to capture the personal dramas of elite performers: emotional, circumstantial, racial, rather than statistical, all of whom bar three in the early 20th century I have met or reported on. It will begin with three contemporary icons – Lionel Messi, Jessica Ennis-Hill and Lewis Hamilton

– plus the sorrow of Lillian Board’s abrupt death 50 years ago; then from segregated black rebel Jack Johnson through the 1930s of Jesse Owens, early post-war Fanny Blankers-Koen and Emil Zátopek, and on to current times with Usain Bolt and social campaigning footballer Marcus Rashford. I hope to portray how, across a century, sport has evolved towards becoming more classless, more integrated, more accessible for everyone: for both the elite and the average. It is the anonymous games teachers, gym instructors and public volunteers who breed the base of the sporting pyramid which ultimately generates champions. They propagate the eventual headlines but seldom receive the credit. My theme precludes debate on triumphant teams as opposed to individuals, teams being part of sport’s massive canvas. The elite 50 I have selected as illustration and inspiration of why sport matters, serve to encourage the rest of us to respond to nature’s subliminal instincts.

George Orwell derided sport, following Moscow Dynamo’s visit to Britain in 1945, as being war without the bullets, ‘unfailing cause of ill will’. He was so wrong: sport is about so much more. There are five universal languages in life – money, politics, art, sex and sport. The latter mostly embraces the first four, additionally and disconcertingly nowadays a sixth in racialism.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed parallel acceleration of the social and climate agitprop campaigns, movements spearheaded by Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, platforms which inevitably attract extreme political interventionists. This tide has aroused demands for staged protests on the Olympic medal podium to be acceptable, removing the International Olympic Committee’s prohibition under Charter Rule 50. The fundamental virtue of that

regulation is, in an echo of Greek philosophy, that the Olympic Games be free of political grandstanding. What sport should propagate is consensus, not division.

Competitive sport forms an emotional medium for identity, whether for an individual, a city, a race, a nation. It can be as emblematic as a play, a poem, a monument, which is not to deny that in excess the emotion can be adverse and even damaging. Yet reflect on what is the most ecstatic experience of the Pacific island of Fiji – winning the rugby sevens at the Rio Olympics in 2016. When cynics argue that the Olympics ruin a city, it is more often the reverse: that a city or an individual corrupts the Olympics. Whether competitive or recreational, sport is a vehicle of self-expression. Even when confined to the humblest mode of exercise, many discover self-improvement merely by a look in the mirror. Sport helps tell us who we are, whether as individuals or nations, but should do so gregariously, not aggressively, even when under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

A suggestion last year by Dominic Raab, Britain's foreign secretary, that the nation should boycott Beijing's Winter Olympics of 2022 on account of genocidal attitudes towards China's Muslim people of Uighur, was imprudent political opportunism. History proves Olympic boycotts carry no momentum: failed attempts to oppose Berlin's Nazi-orchestrated Games of 1936 are wholly remembered for the glory of Jesse Owens, Afro-American, and his spontaneous friendship with rival German long-jumper Lutz Long; the consecutive boycotts of 1976, '80 and '84 harmed only those who stayed away. A boycott in 2020 by Britain, a minor winter sports nation, would have zero impact on domestic Chinese policy. Not only does the British government have no jurisdiction over a constitutionally independent

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British Olympic Association, but effective reprisal would have to be diplomatic or economic. Disapprove of a nation? Do not elect them as hosts in the first place, rather than harangue them later. The Olympic Games must never be a political tool.

The objective of my amalgam of memories of elite performers across a century, having met and recorded their deeds, is to emphasise how significant is sport in society. Irrespective of millions of spectators – those paying handsomely to watch professional dramas, humble families attending village contests, those exploiting modest leisure gymnasia – the sports industry in Britain employs over 300,000 people. Irrevocably, sport matters. I hope my recollections, tracing individual landmarks of history, may provide a sense of what sport generates in the passage of life as a fundamental culture: a sensation of emotion, no less profound than that experienced in the heroic Greek battle episodes of Marathon, where soldier Pheidippides ran 40 kilometres to relate victory over Persia in 490 BC, or that at Thermopylae in 480 BC when Leonidas and a thousand outnumbered compatriots fought to the death to hold a pass against invading Persia. The peacetime deeds of Indian-American Jim Thorpe, Afro-Americans Owens and Arthur Ashe, Aborigine Cathy Freeman, Anglo-Saxon Steve Redgrave or Caribbean Usain Bolt, have symbolised for us all the human spirit: sometimes sorrowfully or disappointing, as with track stars Lillian Board or Dave Bedford. This is my story.

Greece kindled the flame. Spiritually believing their gods and goddesses lived on Mount Olympus, they founded the ancient Olympics, bound by a truce demanding cessation of any war for the duration, an olive wreath decorating

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the winners. That historic initiation was echoed in 1850 by Dr William Penny Brookes, establishing in Shropshire the Wenlock Olympic Games, for ‘moral, physical and intellectual promotion’; events included athletics, football, cricket and quoits. Significantly, it was a visit by Baron Pierre De Coubertin in 1890 which spurred the French aristocrat for his launch in 1894, at the Sorbonne in Paris, of the IOC. And here we are today, countless modern champions financially sponsored by that ancient goddess of victory – Nike. We owe so much to the wooded Mediterranean grove of Olympia.

Sport, as suggested, is a microcosm of our existence: of success and failure, effort and frustration, celebration and dismay, or sometimes, below the anxiety of serious competition, simply the fun and laughter. And never forget – this being an historic ingredient of the Olympic Games – it should essentially be founded on friendship, whether international or domestic, ‘getting to know the other side’. In one sense, Orwell is correct: that sport is an alternative to war, to some of the emotions, jealousies and injustices that provoke war, so that sport can be a kind of safety valve, a testosterone escape mechanism that induces pride rather than rage, beauty instead of horror. It is no coincidence that a pillar of sporting achievement should be the marathon race. The courage that sport often requires is so often a mirror of the battle. The psychology of sport can indeed be profound.

On the other hand, we should not be obsessive about sport; it is not the ultimate but part of life’s cultural fabric. For the last two centuries, the romanticists have been attempting to find the alternative to the industrial revolution, and sport offers part of that enterprise, providing social relativity and individual or collective gratification. Viv Richards, the

celebrated West Indian cricketer, striking a lofted six at Lord's Cricket Ground in London, or Pelé's rasping 1,000th goal at Rio's Maracanã cathedral, can briefly lift a nation's morale. Yet while Jean Giraudoux, French author and playwright, reflects that 'the ball is that thing which most easily escapes the laws of life', those without the eye-to-hand (or foot) synthesis of bouncing-ball dexterity should not be scorned. They may well excel at static competition such as chess or bridge, or the professions of science, engineering, law, medicine or industry. Yet they, in turn, should not be dismissive of physical games, as many respected, avowed intellectuals such as the late, esteemed Bernard Levin have been. Briefly editor of *The Times*, Simon Jenkins, subsequently chairman of the National Trust among public cultural appointments and publications, adopted a patronisingly condescending but ignorant attitude towards sport: once archly writing prior to an Olympics 'wake me up for the mile', unaware this was an event never contested.

Jenkins indulged in a veritable minor hobby, denigration of sport and its management, bypassing the IOC's basic ethic of global friendship and communication and instead condemning the inadequacies of certain members, or constantly suggesting alterations to sports' governance: such as widening football's goalposts or the size of the hole in golf, abolition of the second serve in tennis to eliminate ace dominance, unaware that grass courts have become a minority surface and that the second serve is the salvation of grassroots players in a sport conspicuous for the level of errors.

Even articulate critics of sport tend to underestimate either the economics or the emotions. For Olympic cities there are two budgets: the cost of more than 30 sports venues, and then the ancillary budget of a city seeking to expand its social,

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industrial or tourist reputation. Nor can the likes of Levin or Jenkins comprehend what brings thousands to line the streets for the funeral of, say, Stanley Matthews or George Best, almost on a par with the acclaim for Admiral Nelson at St Paul's Cathedral, truly touching the heart.

What would-be intellectuals also tend not to comprehend, especially concerning elite and therefore nowadays predominantly professional sport, is that it requires total mental and physical commitment. There is no hiding place when intently observed by either a live audience of thousands or, additionally, by millions on television. The merest hesitation, whether emotional, or moral in the context of regulations, will be instantly apparent. Architects, lawyers, physicians and the like have their character flaws but are protected by professional qualifications. The sports performer is wholly exposed – though I am excluding for the moment the wretched escalation of cheating, drugs-wise or other. Yes, there has always been an element of bending the rules – foul tackles in football, no-balls in cricket, below-the-belt blows in boxing, all either accidental or occasionally intended but governed by correction laws.

Character is part of the public appeal. Above and beyond appreciation of commitment, of loyalty to club, country, by and to supporters in team games, is sportsmanship. And I do not mean old-fashioned amateurism of supposed English gentry of the 19th century, but simple honesty. It is so often character which defines sport, whether immaculate West Indies all-rounder Gary Sobers or Roger Federer from Switzerland. There is no stronger currency with the public, even if a minority will occasionally extol a braggart or a bully. Idealistically, spectators give their soul to perfection in sport. To Muhammad Ali or Usain Bolt or Lionel Messi: occasionally, as with Ali or ethnic

minority social reformers such as Aborigine fountain-head Cathy Freeman, there being social addenda.

One of my earliest journalistic memories is from the renowned Kop grandstand at Liverpool Football Club's emotional Anfield stadium. A gifted but somewhat timid winger was summarily clobbered by the opposing full-back. As a moment's silence awaited Liverpool's free kick, a lone voice drifted from the Kop, 'It 'im with yer 'andbag, Brian.' I'm granting anonymity to 'Brian'. How often might we wish to shout at a lawyer, politician, town planner, police chief – or journalist – to 'give us their best'? Symptomatic of what I mean is the tribute on the title page of that tennis bible by America's journalistic doyen of the game, Bud Collins. From an avalanche of historically memorable players from around the world, for sportsmanship without equal, Collins thanked Arthur Ashe: black campaigner for humanity on and off the court. Contrary to Orwell's concept of inherent ill will – which understandably can exist, with evidence of football violence from London to Moscow to Latin America, or boxing-ring malevolence in the Olympic Games – sport not only promotes generosity in the arena, but extensive financial charity from wealthy professionals such as Federer and Messi, or Marcus Rashford, Manchester United's disciple for adequate school meals for the impoverished; increasingly in the late 20th and early 21st century, sport has expanded, pre-COVID, the reach of social, racial and gender mobility.

Part of the magic of sport is dependent upon spectators, themselves skilled or unskilled, but optimistically waiting to be captivated by a theatrical act, the outcome of which is unknown. How did I stumble into such good fortune of employment as a writer? Frankly, by child accident of severe scalding and subsequent skin-grafting which rendered

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me ineligible for National Service, plus the cancellation of an appointment in education, wartime loneliness, and an emerging, rewarding degree of my own moderate sporting aptitude. Scalded by near boiling water across my back from my shoulders to my knees aged three, I should have died and didn't. A devoted hospital nurse soothingly stroked my forehead for the first 48 hours, my limbs tied to the bed corners to prevent movement, all memory hitherto obliterated. Survival was immense luck.

My father, an aspiring stage actor, joining the RAF on the outbreak of war, my mother losing two infant daughters, our house blitzed, I was evacuated to a great aunt and then to a boarding prep school aged seven. Weeping nightly inconsolably, I planned my imaginary escape by the number 18 bus from Epsom to anywhere I could safely hide in Surrey's woods, being a boy scout adroit with campfires. My ally and solace was nature, the blossom of spring, then and always. Yet suddenly football and cricket came to my rescue.

Inadvertently, though small I discovered I could drop-kick a football higher than anyone else. Esoteric. Refuge. Instant semi-celebrity. The pelting with acorns or conkers by senior bullies, long tolerated, now ceased. My incentives with the leather mounted when a visiting professional coach from Charlton Athletic – his name now sadly evaporated – demonstrated he could kick a ball from Surrey almost into Kent. Here could be my echo of father's theatrical stage.

Alongside was cricket. An early voracious reader, I had been religiously absorbing the red-ball gospel from the age of six. My dear wartime nanny, uninformed, was duly alarmed when discovering me immersed in a *Sunday Express* exclusive, 'Don Bradman's Secret Sorrow', supposing I was prematurely into illicit romance documentation.

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To relieve interminable leisure boredom – wartime re-engaged retired schoolmasters fell asleep at weekends – I engaged in protracted two-man Test matches with another loner, Joe Hyams: he England, I Australia, every ball bowled, struck, fielded and the possible runs mutually debated, with our saga lasting for days. An unplanned journalistic discipline was being fashioned. Addiction to the game was furthered immediately post-war, aged ten, fielding at long-on for the straight drives, when the touring Australian Test side, led by the incomparable Lindsay Hassett, indulged in net practice at the Saffrons Ground at Eastbourne where I could clamber over the brick wall. Rewardingly, at close, they would bowl a couple of overs at me.

From there on – with maths, Latin, and chemistry taking their chance with this unacclaimed but academically comfortable student – sport accelerated with increasing rhythm: Surrey Prep Schools XI, Public Schools v FA Youth XI (including future England captain Johnny Haynes); spellbound by the sorcery of the Matthews FA Cup Final of 1953; junior 100 metres at the August Bank Holiday Games at White City; 220 yards hurdles for Cambridge University; javelin performer (undistinguished) for Achilles Club; orchestrating the goal against Oxford which the *Daily Mail's* chief correspondent described as ‘one of the best ever seen at Wembley’; coached by such experts as Arthur Rowe and Bill Nicholson of Spurs, Joe Mercer of Everton, Arsenal and England and manager of Manchester City, and by former Corinthian winger Norman Creek with England Amateurs; missing an open goal for England Amateurs at Loftus Road against QPR and being the only player not selected against Scotland the following Saturday (remembered daily for the next 60 years!).

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Coached at cricket by the physically towering but gently cheerful George Geary, of Leicestershire and England, considered in the late 1920s the most accurate medium-pace bowler in the world (5-35 in Sydney), who could pitch a ball on a proverbial handkerchief in the nets to force you to play a particular stroke; coached at squash by inimitable Nazrullah Khan; at rugby – merely conversationally – by England full-back Nigel Gibbs; at athletics by Cambridge hurdler Brian Young, he as headmaster turning up at the track somewhat inappropriately in pinstripe trousers; and morally in the classroom by inaugural Everest summit pathfinder Wilfred Noyce, a man of serene disposition.

The Bank Holiday Games had been specifically memorable. An ardent reader of Olympic lore and the likes of such legends as Jim Thorpe and Jesse Owens, a distant hero at London in 1948 had been Mal Whitfield, 800 metres champion with such melodic stride, no visible rise and fall of the shoulders even when accelerating, that he seemed to float. He had retained his title at Helsinki in 1952. Now here I was at the old White City, home of London 1908, warming up for my semi-final (eliminated in fourth place) alongside Whitfield himself, there being no external warm-up area beneath the grandstand. I felt elevated by our shared preparation. As we each independently took a breather a few yards apart, the legend's quiet friendly word was profound. 'What we're doing here is as important as what we do on the track.'

At school, in the lingering 'amateurism' of the 1950s, even wearing a tracksuit and warming up was unflatteringly regarded as professionalism. Prior to arriving at Cambridge on a county scholarship – my father's fluctuating stage career, including the inaugural performance of Shaw's *Saint Joan*, scuttled by RAF service as a radar operator

in the Battle of Britain and thereafter, and embarking post-war as an impecunious prototype Basil Fawley – I languidly read zoology, with a view to entering medicine, and at Cambridge the philosophy of science, lectured by renowned young American philosopher Russell Hanson (a Harvard shot putter) who sadly died young in pursuit of his flying hobby. Philosophy seemed more absorbing than dissecting a frog.

The social vault from school adolescence to university trainee-manhood was for me something of a nightmare. Britain in the 1950s was undergoing – having elected a Labour government in 1945, with evolutionary disposal of their totemic and inspirational war leader – a dress rehearsal of class reorientation, which would pervade the established domestic, cultural and employment structure in the 1960s. I was in no-man's land: where did I belong? My mother descended from landed gentry, who had founded one of the earliest newspapers, the *Mercury* of Manchester in 1752, but the family had squandered inherited wealth. Regarded as a valueless daughter, my mother had rebelled, scandalously left home aged 17 – her parents never searched for her – to join an immigrant White Russian (Belarus) orchestra, and precariously married a penniless actor who now post-war was socially and economically adrift among the professional classes while running a downmarket 19th-century coaching inn, short on trade in a bankrupt nation.

My father Wilfred was an emotional conundrum, simultaneously affectionate yet insecure and self-protectively ill-tempered. A late child of a frail, bed-ridden mother, and his gifted but irascible church-organist and actor-manager father, of 19th-century old-school theatre's dramatic exaggeration, who would pursue his unwelcome children down Shaftesbury

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Avenue with a carving knife when not otherwise occupied composing the libretto for Stephen Philpot's *Dante and Beatrice*: a turn-of-the-century opera widely performed in Britain and America. My father left school at 15, tumbled into teenage drama school with Bernard Lee (James Bond's spymaster M) and thence into the esteemed West End company of Sybil Thorndyke launching Shaw's inaugural *St Joan*. Yet he was so lacking in confidence that he hid behind his father's name, 'William Miller Junior': until I was ten or so I was puzzled why all his friends referred to him as Bill, and by then I had identified that if we were coherently to relate the initiative had to come from me.

My only professional 'contact' was mother's (family-preferred) brother, a GP in distant Galloway, digging through snowdrifts to reach his patients in an era when bedside courtesy was still a medical flagship. Having attended an independent school, Charterhouse, courtesy of a benevolent great aunt sympathetic to mother's loss of two infant girls, the only cultural structure I knew, beyond academia, was sport: a ladder towards respectability and status, possible economic administrative foothold; as Gary Lineker, vastly talented son of a Leicester market trader, and many others, were to discover.

Cambridge, unintentionally, opened the gate. Suddenly there was the objective of playing at Wembley against Oxford: a privilege extended by the FA, through to the 1990s, to promote the game at schools in rivalry to rugby. That Wembley glamour at the time was magnified by the emergence of Pegasus, a combined Oxford and Cambridge team founded in 1948 and twice winning football's FA Amateur Cup, this abolished with the termination of the amateur distinction in 1973. Crowds of 100,000 witnessed Pegasus at Wembley: the club dissolved after 20 years. Yet this team of part-time amateurs, assembled

from their professional jobs in all corners of England for a Saturday afternoon, were an echo of former Corinthians for adventure and romance – 19 gaining international honours – the victorious side against Bishop Auckland in 1951 being considered by some professional commentators as superior to FA Cup winners Newcastle United.

Whatever my football career might have been, never mind my father's repetitive assurance that 'football will never earn you a living', my path, by abstract association, was determined. Attention to chemistry and zoology became flagrantly irrelevant. I was so fortunate: sport was to provide, unexpectedly, an iridescent career – though not as performer. I think my convoluted background combined to guide me towards supporting as journalist, almost alone in Fleet Street for the *Daily Telegraph* at the time, the freedom from English football's maximum wage in 1960/61; then celebrating Wimbledon abolishing the institutional sham amateurism of tennis, and simultaneously, US silver millionaire Lamar Hunt's creation of a professional tour; most significantly, subsequently for *The Times* campaigning for the abolition of South Africa's apartheid regime; later Olympic acceptance of professionalism in 1987 to prosper egalitarian training, in acknowledgement of 50 years' reality of 'shamateurism'.

With my laboratory disillusionment at Cambridge and the withering disintegration of my parents' union, my prospect of Olympic football selection evaporating at grassless Loftus Road, and my residing loneliness detonated by falling in love under the willows caressing the idyllic Cam, I abandoned, to a headmaster's ire, an appointment to teach chemistry. So what now?

I had university subsistence bills to pay, I needed a summer vacation job and through the benign influence of Geoffrey

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Green, eminent but in those days anonymous football and tennis correspondent of *The Times*, was offered the post of 'relief' sports sub-editor – which enabled staff to relax on holiday. Green himself had been an iconic centre-half for the famous Corinthians, said by ace professional Charlie Buchan to have been the best in the land, amateur or pro. My task as sub-editor was to handle, daily, up to 14 simultaneous County Championship scorecards in full, including bowling analysis, and not to provoke a dozen retired clergymen's letters by omitting 'extras'. In late summer, a fellow sub was promoted to rugby correspondent, whereby I was able to fill the desk vacancy – on 18 guineas a week, some 30 per cent better than a lowly chemistry master. Sixty-five years later, gratuitously I am still there, so to speak.

Relating the exhilarations of legendary figures is to capture, I hope, something of the fascination that envelops all of us, of whatever race or origin, in some shared joy. The laudable perfection of, say, Lew Hoad, Olga Korbut or Seve Ballesteros at their peak cannot be precisely defined: any more than a Constable or a Gauguin. One moment an unexpected epic, the next gone forever, bar a two-dimensional TV reminder. A privilege to have been there, an inspirational incentive as individual novice to try your hand.

Imperative within the contemporary social equation is an elevation, in both performance and media promotion, of women's sport: their right to receive proportional exposure and appreciation as half the human race, being equally as capable as men of creating drama, say, on the ocean waves as at an indoor hall. Women, and women in sport, also matter.