

The Sachem Solutions Manifesto

In spite of itself, rugby union is still the greatest sport to play, a fun game to watch, and a tolerable one to follow.

The tension in the development of any sport is between the amateur and professional perspectives (which are distinct from amateur and professional status). The amateur perspective foregrounds a sport's inherent value, while the professional perspective holds the sport as a means to another end.

The amateur perspective provides a better aesthetic experience for both athlete and spectator, but as sports are commodified, actual professional execution conflates with the professional perspective, leading to the wrong conclusion that the professional perspective provides the better spectator experience. Since, in commodified sports, the spectator's experience dominates the player's, any developed sport is pulled toward the professional perspective, in a misguided attempt to provide the spectator a better experience. This is true even when there are no actual spectators to speak of, as in a U.S. high school rugby match.

Even as rugby is increasingly commodified, it, more than any other sport, recognizes the value of the amateur perspective, even to the extent of codifying it in the laws. Law 10 begins, "Foul Play is anything a person does within the playing enclosure that is against the letter *and spirit* of the Laws of the Game." (emphasis added).

Section 10.2 includes "cynical infringements" as grounds for yellow and red cards. The phrase "cynical infringement" is interchangeable in rugby parlance with "professional foul," reflecting the sport's deep understanding of the difference between the amateur perspective, where fouls in the course of play are committed mistakenly, through a failure to execute or an over-exuberance of effort, and the professional perspective, where fouls are committed without conscience, because the external end justifies any manipulation of the mere means of the game.

Section 10.3 goes even further than the introduction of 10.1 and 10.2's explicit condemnation of the professional perspective, by authorizing the penalizing any player who "behave[s] in any way contrary to the true Spirit of the Game." The provision is extraordinary in acknowledging a spirit of the game that transcends the spirit of the laws (as in 10.1), in elevating both the Spirit and the Game through the use of capital letters, and especially in the claim of the adjective "true" that the Spirit of the Game is both knowable and irreducible.

Section 10.1, with its reference to the spirit [no capitalization] of the Laws, is just a catch-all, to make sure that a player's creativity in transgressing doesn't exceed that of the lawmakers' in listing possible transgressions. It takes the mundane position that any reasonable reader of the Laws may meaningfully extrapolate from the enumerated laws to those that are unenumerated but intended.

Rugby is unusual, maybe unique, in including both the mundane catch-all and then, separately, an appeal to the somewhat mystical Spirit of the Game. Law 12 of the laws of the International Football Association Board has a couple of references to cautioning (yellow-carding) a player for showing "a lack of respect for the game," but there's no actual associated penalty, and the references are to do with unsporting behavior, not the actual conduct of play.

The distinction between the amateur and professional perspectives is not only -- or even mainly -- to do with manipulating the rules of the game. The bite is sharper in devising strategies in complete accord with the letter and spirit of rules. The last twenty years or so have been characterized by increasing sophistication in our understanding of optimal behaviors, not only in sport but across the full range of human endeavor. The results have been dispiriting, as careful study shows again and again that algorithms best genius. It seems unlikely at this point that there is any field -- even including the authoring of algorithms -- where this rule won't hold. There seems to be no qualitative limit, only limits on what has been studied to date.

The professional perspective ruthlessly embraces optimization. In commodified sports, rewards (it appears) go to the winners. Teams that win (it appears) attract more fans, sell more merchandise, sign bigger media contracts. Ditto for players who contribute to teams' winning. Spectators -- through training or, more likely,

human nature -- take a partisan view of sports, identifying tightly with the teams and players they support and, especially, embracing their identities as winners or losers. It could be otherwise, with spectators embracing a more purely aesthetic view and caring more about the quality of a contest, or identifying with teams and players who adopt an aesthetically pleasing approach. But it isn't.

Worse (for lovers of the amateur perspective), the commodification of sport has reached such a zenith that actual spectating is a shrinking part of fandom.

Reactions to aesthetic experiences in sport are increasingly seen as naive. What happened on the playing enclosure is increasingly seen as less important than what should have happened, as probabilistic discourse replaces appreciation.

Extraordinary plays -- good or bad -- become discounted outliers on scatter plots.

We love the amateur perspective. We yearn for the days of cotton jerseys, under which a prop's belly could jiggle in dignified privacy, when strict substitution rules limited opportunities for coachly meddling, when rucks were hotly contested and centers in postgame showers bore the stripes of cleat-raking, when the ball occasionally came out the back of a scrum.

And we're curious. We wonder what are the characteristics of an optimal rugby player, an optimal rugby team, an optimal rugby strategy. How much do those characteristics vary by level and style of play, and -- maybe most important -- what constellation of laws and Spirit brings into closest alignment the professional perspective of optimization with the amateur perspective of aesthetic brilliance?

Relentlessly, rugby will move toward optimization. We want to see that future now, before it is fixed.