

# The Business of Sport, Sledging and the Corruption of Play – an Interpretation through a Huizingian-Bourdieu Lens

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## ABSTRACT

Using a combined Huizingian-Bourdieu framework, this paper analyses the significance of sport's transformation into a business and how the prevailing business structure that defines professional sport has influenced the 'lived experience' of those playing at sport's elite level. Furthermore, this paper highlights how the actions of players, coaches and other participants serve to reinforce, legitimise and normalise the business characteristics of sport's dominant business structure.

Importantly, this paper illuminates how the professionalization of sport corrupts the act of playing and indeed gives rise to play tactics, such as 'sledging', which both reflects the increased seriousness of sport and, in its very execution, further reinforces the dominant business structures of professional sport, all the while corrupting the essence of sport – play.

In doing so we are challenged to consider how society's fields could be different in structure, and in the 'lived experience' within the field.

sport, play, sledging, Huizinga, Bourdieu

**KEYWORDS**

## Introduction

The professional sports industry is now a multi-billion dollar entertainment business. The last four decades has seen many suburban, grassroots clubs in a range of countries and elite sports around the world, transform into professional businesses. Indeed many of these clubs are willing to pay their players millions of dollars for their talent and skill to help ensure on-field success, which increasingly translates into off-field financial prosperity. Winning has never been more important.

Furthermore, professional athletes are some of the wealthiest, most recognisable and influential people in the world. The most recognisable sports stars, unlike professionals from many other fields, transcend national borders. They are athletes, but they are also now employees, product ambassadors and promoters – of their club, sport or even sponsors.

This has not always been the case. Sport hasn't always been the big business phenomenon that it is today. Players were once amateurs, not employees of the club or organisation. Likewise, play was less interrupted with tactics, game plans and set-plays. Sport was not structured as a business and players did not act as participants within a business.

This paper analyses the significance of sport's transformation into a business and how the prevailing business structure that defines professional sport has influenced the 'lived experience' of those playing at sport's elite level. Furthermore, this paper will highlight how the actions of players, coaches and other participants serve to reinforce, legitimate and normalise the business characteristics of sport's dominant business structure.

Importantly, this paper will illuminate how the professionalization of sport has corrupted the act of playing and indeed given rise to play tactics, such as sledging, which both reflects the increased seriousness of sport and, in its very execution, further reinforces the dominant business structures of professional sport, all the while corrupting the essence of sport – play.

The argument of this paper is formed and expounded through a combined Huizingian-Bourdieu framework, based on adopting Johan Huizinga's concept of play and his historical observations of play's corruption, and includes a discussion of sledging and its role in further eroding key characteristics of play.

Pierre Bourdieu's theories and concepts of field, capital and habitus are utilised to interpret and make sense of how and why this has happened.

This is an important study as it highlights the importance of play, even in professional sport. In doing so, the impacts of sledging and, more broadly, of play's corruption, are also illuminated. By interpreting the role of sledging in sport through a Huizingian-Bourdieu theoretical lens we are challenged to consider how society's fields could be different in structure, in the actions of participants within various fields and indeed, in the relationship between the field's structures and the 'lived experience' within the field.

## What is Play?

There is no shortage of scholars and theorists across a wide range of subjects and disciplines who have contributed to the study of play.

As Gwen Gordon (2008) writes in her essay *In search of a Universal Definition*:

*"The ambiguous, variable and paradoxical nature of the play concept is so widely accepted, that most play theorists consider the search for a universal definition to be pure folly... There are few subjects that have been poked and prodded by as many disciplines as play has. And, like the famous blind men describing their limited section of the elephant, each elephant has come to a different conclusion about the nature of play."*

Most studies of play directly, or indirectly, draw on the classical work of Dutch cultural historian, Johan Huizinga, as the starting point of their work. While Huizinga's most famous study of play, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, celebrates its eightieth year since publication this year, the key characteristics of play expounded in this classical work is still a common and prominent feature of more modern studies of the play element. Furthermore, Huizinga's study of the 'play ideal' provides a reference point to measure how far play has been transformed.

Huizinga (1950, p. 8) defined described play as 'a discharge of superabundant vital energy' with four key characteristics, including:

1. Play is free, in fact, it is freedom;
2. Play is not ordinary or real;
3. Play is secluded and limited ;
4. Play 'creates order, is order.'

His broader definition of play, as expressed in *Homo Ludens* is that play is:

*A free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life, as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space and according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It*

*creates the formation of social groupings, which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means* (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13).

The characteristics outlined by Huizinga that are reflected in more modern works of play are that play is fun, play is free and play is autonomous, separate to ordinary and real life (1950, p. 2). For Huizinga, play can indeed be serious, but only in the play contest. However, even when the play contest is serious, it should not be as serious as ordinary and real life as the play participants are ‘only playing.’ According to Huizinga, play was a separate dimension to other parts of life and as such, the outcomes of the play contest, regardless of the result, started and ended in the play contest itself (1950, p. 8).

This relates to another of Huizinga’s characteristics – that play is free. Players should participate in play voluntarily, without financial reward and without restriction. Yet in being free, play should be also be spontaneous, creative, unrestricted uninhibited and unconstrained. If play is managed or manipulated to the point where the player is no longer able to play without constraint, then they are no longer free, or, at the very least, they are less free. If play is no longer free, it is corrupted.

Although expounded eighty years ago, these characteristics have been embraced and adopted by many theorists who have critiqued Huizinga or contributed to the broader study of play, including play scholars such as Caillois, Hans, Millar and Sutton-Smith<sup>1</sup> Susanna Millar (1968, p. 21) writes that the core of play is ‘an attitude of throwing off constraint.’ Once a player is free and without constraint, they can shake off the emotional, social or even physical burdens of real and ordinary life and freely act with instinct and spontaneity within the autonomous play field. Importantly, this release of energy and feeling of freedom and unrestraint enables the player to reveal their full self.

As Viola Spolin (1963, p. 11) writes:

*“In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself – he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure and face all dangers unafraid...Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure.”*

This highlights the importance of play.

## Why is play important?

According to Huizinga, in order to form strong and authentic relationships citizens must first be able to reveal their full and whole self. Play, in an autonomous environment, enables this. The ‘ideal’ play element enables play participants to be creative, instinctive, unguarded and unrestrained. They can act without constraint or ‘break off the shackles’ of their real-life emotional, social and even physical burdens. However, a player can only reveal their whole self if they are able to play in an environment they trust and which is autonomous. That is, for them to be completely free, the consequences of their actions when playing must be relatively inconsequential to the rest of their life. If this is the case, the full self is revealed.

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<sup>1</sup>For a more in depth analysis of play theorists and their critique of Huizinga see:

Caillois, R., The Definition of Play and The Classification of Games, in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, Salen, K., and Zimmerman, E., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, 2006.

Sutton-Smith, B., *The ambiguity of play*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

Hans, J. S., *The play of the world*, University of Massachusetts Press, Boston, 1981.

Duncan, S., *Footy Grounds to Grandstands: Play, Community and the Australian Football League*, Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, 2016.

When playing with others, particularly within teams, players can act freely and reveal their full self while participating in a common pursuit, while working for a shared outcome or goal. In doing so, real, authentic, strong connections and friendships are formed and the origins of community are stimulated.

The link between ‘being free’ in an autonomous, trusted setting and forming strong, positive and genuine relationships is one that has been explored in several fields of study. Psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott (1974, p. 74) illuminated the nexus of freedom and authentic relationships in his book *Playing and Reality*.

Winnicott writes:

*“It is in playing, and only playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”*

Winnicott’s enquiry in psychoanalysis supports Huizinga’s historical observations of the importance of play. He argued that for the patient to reveal their full self, to communicate freely and to form a strong, trusting relationship with their doctor, they must first play. Furthermore, the patient needs to be able to play with freedom, creativity and, importantly, be unrestricted and uninhibited. If the patient’s environment is compromised, the patient-doctor relationship is harmed.

More broadly, if play is compromised, not only is the freedom, creativity, spontaneity and fun of the players, but so too are the relationships formed between play participants.

According to Huizinga, this happens when play becomes more organised, structured and serious.

### The corruption of play

Huizinga noted that sport, as a reflection of society, was becoming increasingly serious (1950, p. 204). As play became more organised, it became corrupted. It lost its autonomy, the outcomes of the play contests had significance beyond the play field and as such, those playing were less free.

Huizinga claimed that play had been transformed, imposed from the top and utilised as a tool for many purposes by the ruling elites across many fields of society (1950, p. 205). He traced this back to the Romans organising play to amuse spectators and argued that ‘ever since the last quarter of a century, games in the guise of sport, have been taken more and more seriously.’

Fundamental to play’s corruption for Huizinga, even in 1938, was his observation that play had lost its autonomy to the market. It has been transformed from a ‘discharge of superabundant vital energy,’ to a commodity, sold to entertain the masses. In doing so, it had become a means of making money, which, for Huizinga, undermined the freedom of play, but also the fun of playing (1950, p. 205). If play was now a commodity, then it was no longer separate to the ordinary and real. Indeed, it had merged with market and the emerging commercial emphasis of the time.

As such, play had become more serious. Winning mattered. Athletes were now sports stars. They were known not just within the sport field, but also beyond. And because ‘being the best’ could grant athletes and organisations wealth, adulation, prestige and power, the act of playing was no longer based on spontaneity and instinct. Rather, it was serious with serious outcomes. It needed to be managed.

Huizinga (1950, p. 204) writes:

*“The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play spirit; it is lacking its spontaneity and carelessness. For the professional, playing is no longer just play. It is also work.”*

The marginalisation of play and its key characteristics has intensified since Huizinga’s study of play. In 2018, play in elite sport is a shadow of what Huizinga described it should be. Professional play is now undoubtedly part of a much bigger sport and entertainment industry, which functions as a business. Play and its outcomes are now measured and analysed. It is also coached and managed, with tactics, set plays, game plans and other winning formulas designed to ensure the best possible chance of victory. This manipulation

of play has fundamentally eroded the key characteristics of play's freedom. Play is now less spontaneous, creative and instinctive and more constrained and restrictive, dictated to by coaches and their tactics, set plays and game plans.

To understand how this works in practice, we first need to create a theoretical lens through which we can view and interpret play's corruption. The theories and observations of Pierre Bourdieu help us do this.

### **Understanding the transformation: Bourdieu's theory in practice**

To understand the underlying reasons for the transformation of sport to business requires an understanding of Bourdieu's concepts of *field*, *capital* and *habitus*. A French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu pioneered investigative frameworks and terminologies to help understand the dynamics of power relations in social life. In building his theoretical framework, Bourdieu developed his key terms of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* as a means of understanding the interactions of citizens within a given setting to gain power or recognition (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258).

From the school of genetic structuralism and critical sociology, Bourdieu was heavily influenced by traditional sociology theory, which he utilised to build upon through the development of his own theory. Max Weber's theories, which centred upon the importance of domination and symbolic systems in social life, as well as the idea of social orders, were substantially drawn upon by Bourdieu to develop the notion of *field*. From Karl Marx, Bourdieu understood that 'society' was the product of a range of social relationships. As will be noted later in this analysis, Bourdieu built upon this to argue that these social relations constrained citizens to recognise each other and compete with each other for socially recognised forms of power<sup>2</sup>.

Bourdieu also inherited a certain structuralist interpretation from the theories of Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Claude Levi-Strauss. Integral to his theories of *field*, *capital* and *habitus* was Bourdieu's claim that social structures tend to reproduce themselves. Yet, Bourdieu was also influenced by theories of phenomenology, particularly through the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty who played an essential part in the formulation of Bourdieu's focus on the body, action and practical disposition. These ideas manifested in Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 60).

Bourdieu's theories of *capital* and *habitus* (and later, the concept of *field*) attempt to reconcile the contrasting objective-subjective antinomy of the social sciences. He wanted to unite social phenomenology and structuralism through his theories of *habitus*. This is an important point in relation to this study, which highlights how the prevailing business structures of professional sport influence the power struggles and actions of the participants within the field while new, emerging practices, such as sledging, serve to reinforce both the 'lived experience' of the field's participants and the structures of the field.

An analysis of Bourdieu's work and, in particular, a practical investigation of his theories of *capital*, *habitus* and *field*, is necessary to understand this more clearly.

### **Bourdieu's theories of field, capital and habitus**

Bourdieu's concept of field concerns the reasons people behave as they do in a certain time and space. Through his notions of capital and habitus, Bourdieu attempted to understand how citizens within the same field seek to gain power from each other from the limitations of the field in which they are a part. He concluded that the behaviour of citizens and the relationships they share with each other reflect their environment and serve to legitimise and reinforce the existing structure of their surroundings (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241).

Bourdieu argued that what appear to be autonomous individuals acting according to their own interests are actually products of an emergent historical system of social relations that constrain these

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<sup>2</sup>Bourdieu discusses Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Mauss and Levi-Strauss in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002

individuals to recognise each other and compete with each other for socially recognised forms of power, which he describes as capital. Thus, capital is any form of power that allows actors to participate in a given field of society to gain further capital, thereby augmenting their positions in the field. He differentiated capital into four types: social capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital, and economic capital (1986, p. 241). Social capital consists of resources based on group membership, relationships, networks or influence, and support. It is ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (1986, p. 245). Cultural capital consists of nonfinancial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means: forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has that give them higher status in society. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system. Symbolic capital refers to the resources available to an individual on the basis of honour, prestige, or recognition. Economic capital refers to one’s command over economic resources such as cash and financial assets.

According to Bourdieu, through these four types of capital, citizens augment and establish their positions in society. In addition, capital is fundamentally linked to fields and habitus.

Bourdieu saw the modern social world as being composed of various fields or structures of social relations. Among the main fields in modern society, he cited the arts, education, law, politics, and the economy (1986, p. 245). Within each field, citizens compete for capital, struggling against each other to establish their positions within that space. In general, the different actors within each field tend to strive for capital specific to that field and independent of capital within any other field. Although each field of society is autonomous and independent of the influences and characteristics of other fields, Bourdieu also believed that the economic field is the most dominant, powerful, and increasingly influential field. Thus, maintaining the autonomy of the other fields is essential to limiting the power of those with economic capital. Bourdieu also believed that the limited characteristics of the field in which they are a part constrain the struggle between citizens for power. This struggle for capital also serves to augment and reproduce the existing dominant structure of the field<sup>3</sup>.

However, if a field loses its autonomy to another more dominant field (e.g., the economic field), the struggle for capital will change to reflect the limitations of the dominant field. Thus, citizens will increasingly battle for the most dominant forms of capital, which in turn will further augment and change the structure and characteristics of the field. According to Bourdieu, if the economic field merges with almost any of the other fields, each field will begin to mirror the next as will the struggle for capital within each field (1986, p. 246).

The notion of habitus further clarifies this process. According to Bourdieu, actors gain capital and power within a field as a result of their habitus, a system of dispositions developed in response to the objective conditions of the field. That is, an individual’s ‘feel for the game’ and struggle for capital is constrained by the dominant characteristics of their surroundings. He also argued that the habitus of an individual augments and reproduces the characteristics of the field. Thus, having absorbed objective social structures into a personal set of dispositions, the subjective nature of an individual’s actions reinforces the characteristics of the field and the relationships within it (1990, p. 52).

This point is fundamentally important in understanding the transformation of sport to business. In an autonomous sport field, sports clubs evolve from play, which characterizes their culture and spirit. However, this process is disrupted when the sport field loses its autonomy to other fields (i.e., the economic and media

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<sup>3</sup>Further to ‘The Forms of Capital’, to read more about Bourdieu’s theories of fields, capital, habitus and cultural production, refer to:

Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J., ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’, in Brown, R., *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1973.

Bourdieu, P., *The Field of Cultural Production: essay is art and literature*, Columbia University Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, P., *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996.

fields). As a result, the pursuit of economic capital begins to dominate the actions of those participating within the field; and the pursuit of economic capital characterizes the culture and spirit of the field and the relationships formed within it. Rather than play being foundational to the culture and spirit of sporting clubs, business characteristics become dominant and are the determinants of play.

### The influence of the economic field

Bourdieu claimed that the economic field has undermined the autonomy of most other fields in society, limiting the habitus of the actors within each field to the structure and characteristics of the economic field and increasing each individual's desire to accumulate economic capital. Thus, the struggle for economic capital begins to define the relationships citizens share with each other and reaffirms the dominating influence of economic ideals across most fields of society. Indeed, the influence of the economic field is so prevalent that all fields have begun to reflect the economic field and, as such, all look the same (1986, p. 251). Today, each field – whether public or private – appears to be characterized, if not defined, by business characteristics. Likewise, the disposition of each individual is increasingly determined through the constraints of the market and the struggle for economic capital, which, according to Bourdieu's theory, simply serves to reinforce and legitimise the dominating features of the economic field. Because the economic field and its dominant philosophies have merged with most of the other fields of society, each field now reflects the other. Furthermore, the habitus (the struggle for capital and relationships between the actors of the field) also mirrors those of other fields. According to Bourdieu, if individuals relate to each other through their habitus, the limitations of their surroundings, and the struggle for capital, then in a field dominated by business ideals, the relationships formed and shared by citizens must be defined through the market.

### The influence of the media field

The role and influence of the media field, already influenced by the economic field, has also merged with the sport field, utilizing play as a product to market and sell to a mass consumer audience to generate profit. In doing so, the media field has influenced the transformation of the sport field into a form of entertainment that fans consume. Thus, as the sport field begins to mirror the economic field, individuals within the sport field begin to develop relationships through the dominant principles of economic rationalism, turning play into a product utilized by key stakeholders within the field as a tool to accumulate economic capital. This, in turn, reinforces the dominant economic characteristics of the field.

The merging of the sport field with the economic and media fields can be understood through the below image.

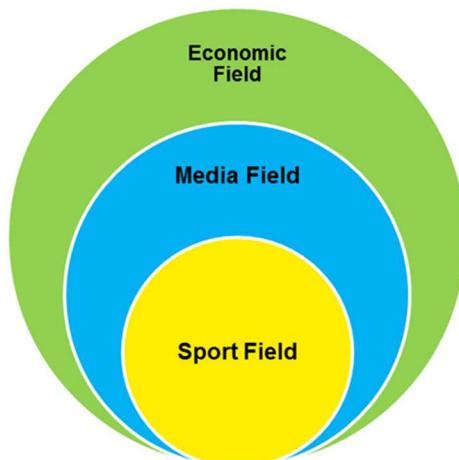


Figure 1. The sport field, media field and economic field today

Source: Duncan, S. (2016). *Footy Grounds to Grandstands: Play, Community and the Australian Football League*, Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press.

## How the business structure of sport has corrupted play

Because professional sport has been transformed into an entertainment business, it is structured as such. Gone are the days of a team consisting of a coach and a group of players. They are now surrounded by assistant coaches, line-coaches, managers, sport scientists, nutritionists and fitness advisors, to name a few (Duncan, 2016, pp. 74-80).

These employees generally sit within a specific department of an organisation alongside other departments such as marketing and media, membership, sponsorship, finance and human resources – all headed by department managers and answerable to the chief executive, general manager, boards and even owners (Duncan, 2016, p. 40).

Because professional sporting bodies are managed as businesses, the bottom line is a primary concern. As outlined above, the overarching objective for most professional sporting teams or athletes is winning or being the best. Winning generally leads to higher crowds and gate receipts, more members, bigger sponsorship deals, higher merchandise sales, increased brand appeal and media exposure. These are all vital sources of revenue, which is generally used to invest in the team to ensure continued on field success, or for some, mere survival (Duncan, 2016, p. 52).

Likewise, for individual athletes, winning comes with several advantages, often including higher salaries, sponsorship deals, recognition, adulation, respect and other forms of social and economic capital.

Because winning is now so important from a business perspective (Duncan, 2016, p. 53), play is carefully managed analysed and scrutinised and includes a range of tools and tactics adopted by coaches and players to gain a competitive advantage against their opponents. This can lead to play being more strategic and managed and less spontaneous and free; more serious and less fun.

The significant increase in coaching personnel within many professional sporting organisations means many sports now have a significantly greater emphasis on team tactics, set plays, game plans and individual player roles (Duncan, 2016, p. 40). These tactics corrupt play. If a player is asked to carry out a particular ‘role’ on the field, or to execute a particular tactic or to constrain their play to ensure their actions fit within the team’s game plan, then they are not able to play with unrestrained flair, freedom, spontaneity, creativity or even possibly, fun. Instead they find themselves in a very serious play contest.

Thus the merging of the sport field with the economic and media fields ultimately erodes the play element. Play is no longer separate from ordinary and real life, for the outcome of the contest has implications beyond the sports field. Indeed winning and being the best can grant teams, players and coaches capital that can be used in many fields within society.

Furthermore, the pursuit of winning means that freedom and fun are often compromised by a plethora of tactics, set plays, game plans and roles. Thus the field’s structures have compromised play and in doing so, influenced the lived experience of those participating within the field.

Yet these tactics, while a reflection of the dominant structures and characteristics of the field, also serve to reinforce the very structures that stimulated their emergence. Indeed these tactics often do further reinforce the business structures of the field, normalise the role tactics and game plans now play in sport and reinforce the importance of winning.

One such tactic is sledging.

## Sledging in sport

Sledging, as a tactic in sport, has been the subject of significant debate - in particular about its use as a ‘fair’ tactic. Some, such as Martin (2013) argue that it is ‘etched in the fabric’ of sports culture and widely accepted by professional athletes as ‘part of their game’. Others, including Simons (2003), illuminate the fact

that sledging can be playful, creative, witty, good natured and fun. This type of sledging might be referred to as ‘banter’.

However, perhaps the more widely held view amongst the many academics who have studied sledging and its place in sport is that it is designed and executed by athletes with more ‘mean spirited’ intentions. The Oxford Dictionary (2018) defines it as ‘insulting or boastful speech intended to demoralize, intimidate or humiliate someone, especially an opponent in an athletic contest’. Many academics agree with this definition.

In their study of cricket, Joseph and Cramer (2001, p. 237) define sledging as ‘the practice whereby players seek to gain an advantage by insulting or verbally intimidating the batter’. Sport Psychology academic, Lisa Martin, states that it is ‘a form of psychological warfare, where the aim is to break the concentration of an opposing player or, at the very least, instil enough doubt in his or her mind to create a mental distraction or a physiological change’. Dixon (2007: 96) is even more hostile about the practice of sledging, or ‘trash talking’, as he refers to it. He defines the term as ‘verbal barbs directed at opponents during a sporting event in order to gain a competitive advantage’, and goes on to argue that that it is ‘morally indefensible’.

*“Attempts to justify trash talking as a strategic ploy that implies no disrespect are disingenuous in the view of the fact that its effectiveness depends on opponents’ being offended by it.”*

Sledging is also likely to be more mean spirited and deliberately hurtful in competitions that are more serious. In their study of trash talking in American college sports, Rainey and Granito (2010, p. 238) found that there was a ‘somewhat greater presence of trash talk among Division 1 athletes’, compared to the athletes participating in the lower level of Division 3.

Therefore, there is little doubt that mean-spirited sledging, used as a tool to hurt, insult, distract and ultimately, to gain a competitive advantage over one or more opponents exists as a legitimate tactic in many professional sports. As such, it is fair to analyse this form of sledging as a tactic that reflects the dominant business structure of professional sport, while also reinforcing them as the norm.

While the theories and concepts of Bourdieu can be used to understand the corruption of play and the actions of the field’s participants at a macro level, the act of sledging can also be understood at a more micro level using Bourdieu’s conceptual framework. Sledging in professional sport can be understood as the micro-level struggle for capital – the capacity to sledge being a form of habitus, whereby play participants are willing to sledge in order to gain power, initially in the form of social capital, but ultimately also in the pursuit of economic capital.

This argument is best illuminated by discussing the act of sledging and how it impacts play.

The emergence of sledging, or at least ‘mean spirited’ sledging, can be seen as a result of the ever increasing importance of winning. As discussed in the preceding section of this paper, professional sporting organisations are in the business of winning. So, too, are athletes. Winning and ‘being the best’ leads to commercial and social power, both in the sport field and beyond. This it is one of the tactics, or actions, that can be adopted to improve the likelihood of success, which impacts the lived experience of those playing.

As discussed above, the merging of the sport field with the economic and media field, which has transformed sport into business, has corrupted play. However, sledging as a tactic, ultimately does the same thing. The fundamental notion of play, that it’s fun, free and separate to ordinary and real life, are all undermined by sledging. Sledging reflects the increased ‘seriousness’ of sport and the incessant pursuit of success in the form of winning. Thus it’s implemented as a tool to gain a competitive advantage.

However, in its practice, the corruption of play, is further manifested. If a player is successful in sledging an opponent they are also likely to be successful in insulting, intimidating, hurting and even demoralizing their opponent. At the very least, they will have successfully distracted them.

The natural question to ask, then, is what does this mean for the player who is subjected to the sledge? It is likely that being the subject of the sledge will mean they are no longer having as much fun. Certainly it's hard to imagine being insulted or degraded is much fun at all. Furthermore, if they are distracted or hurt, they are no longer free to play without constraint as they are now concerned with being sledged. And, if the sledge is particularly hurtful or insulting, it is likely that the impact of the sledge will transcend the play contest and extend into the real and ordinary parts of their life. Certainly, it is not hard to believe that sledging about topics such as race, gender, sexuality, family members and violence would likely result in repercussions well after the final siren of the play contest has sounded.

Therefore, sledging reflects the corruption of play at the hands of the dominant business features of play, which is characterised by an increased seriousness in the play contest and a reduction of fun, freedom and autonomy from other parts of life. In doing so, play's corruption is reinforced and further normalized.

However, so too is the structure of the field and the habitus of the field's participants - the players. The very structures, characterized by business and commerce, which stimulate tactics such as sledging, are strengthened and normalized through the action itself. Thus, the importance of winning in order to produce revenue and ultimately profit appears as common sense. And, consciously or not, the corruption of play and its fundamental characteristics of fun, freedom and autonomy are continually eroded.

At the micro level of the field, the act of sledging as a form of habitus highlights the way in which individual social agents negotiate, and unwittingly reproduce, the tensions of the field and competition for capital, which manipulates the essence of the field – the play ideal.

To ensure a sense of play remains a part of the sporting contest, even at the professional level, intervention from sporting bodies is required.

### **Upholding the play ideal**

While play, as Huizinga described it, has long ceased to exist in professional sport, it is still vitally important that the key characteristics of play – fun, freedom and autonomy – are upheld in some way to ensure it is reflected in modern sport.

Professional sport today is ‘corrupted play’ and due to the irreversible merging of the sport field with the economic and media fields, the play element is only likely to become more managed, not less. Yet this process can and should be minimized. Organisations presiding over elite sporting competitions must strive to ensure that within the plethora of implemented game plans, set plays and tactics that the ‘spirit of play’, in the form of fun and freedom, are encouraged and even actively pursued. That is, players must be able to play with some sense of freedom, creativity, instinct and spontaneity.

Furthermore, sporting bodies should use the ‘spirit of the play’ as a guiding factor when considering the approval of new tactics and rules with the question of *‘how does this effect play?’* at the forefront of their decision-making. This will ensure that some form of the play ideal and its characteristics of fun, freedom and autonomy lives on, helping players form stronger and more genuine relationships than they would in a field in which ‘play’ has been completely corrupted.

Ultimately, this means sporting bodies will be required to intervene to ensure tactics such as sledging don’t further erode the play element.

### **Conclusion**

As this study has highlighted, the dominant business structures of the professional sports field and the subsequent actions of those participating in play within the field has reinforced the existing status quo of the field’s structure and the ‘lived experience’ within it, which, includes the corruption of play. Fun, freedom, creativity, spontaneity and fairness are compromised at the expense of business.

In understanding this, we are challenged to think of how fields of society, such as the sport field, could be different, just as Bourdieu did in his book, '*Fighting Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market.*'

While one of the limitations of this study is that the theory is not extensively expounded to a specific case study of elite, professional sport, it is successful in providing a theoretical lens through which we can view and understand the changing nature of play. Certainly, the theory discussed in this analysis could be used to view and understand the transformation of a range of different sports into a business and how the prevailing business structure that defines professional sport has influenced the 'lived experience' of those playing at sport's elite level.

As highlighted in this study, while is it true that 'play' in professional sport will never again reflect play as Huizinga described it, it is vitally important for the 'spirit of play' to remain a prominent part of the play contest in professional sport.

The spirit of play should reflect, as much as possible, the key characteristics of Huizinga's play – fun, freedom and autonomy – and should be utilized as a moral compass, guiding sport forward and arbitrating new tactics as they arise from the pursuit of winning.

To completely extinguish the spirit of play is to risk the emergence and wide spread acceptance of far more sinister tactics than sledging. Cheating in its many forms – from illegal drug use, match fixing, spot fixing and tanking to name a few – represents the antithesis of Huizinga's play. This form of cheating exists, prominently, in some sports and will continue to normalize without a focus on upholding the 'spirit of play'.

Therefore, to ensure the spirit of play is reflected in the modern play contest of professional sport, sporting organisations must interrupt the relationship between the business structure of sport and the actions of its participants. In doing so they must embrace the key characteristics of Huizinga's play concept and utilize them to guide the on field actions of professional players and coaches to ensure they respect and uphold, as much as possible, the spirit of play.

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