



Agon Lost – or in Disguise? A Commentary

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to John W. Loy one of the recurrent themes in Institute of Scandinavian Physical Culture (ISPC) was “agon“. First, I offer some old Nordic examples on games – possibly with an agonal element. Then I focus on moral and character in order to identify some sort or a vestige of agon and revisit physical culture in terms of “idræt”, an old Nordic word for athletics and sport. Finally, I ask if there is – atavistic or not – in the modern world any glimpse of agonal behavior to be found and appreciated within the three realms or categories, which could be pillars of a physical education program: Nature, combat/competition and aesthetics. Would Edmund Hillary, Nelson Mandela and Pussy Riot qualify into a renewed, more general perception of agon?

KEYWORDS

agon, ball games, physical culture, physical education

In the late 1970s I applied to the Danish Minister of Cultural Affairs, Niels Matthiasen, for a grant to invite North American scholars in sport science – in particular sport sociology and phenomenology – and instructors in modern dance. At that time both areas were quite new in research and teaching in Denmark. The funding was granted and the program of *Institute of Scandinavian Physical Culture* (ISPC) was founded. The ISPC exchange program operated in about 25 years and scholars and graduate students from many parts of the world took part. Programs were also held in Iceland, Norway, USA and Canada.

John W. Loy was a member of the pioneering group that visited Denmark in 1980 – and was a contributor throughout the existence of ISPC. Other participants from the early days were: Alan G. Ingham, Robert Morford, Seymour Kleinman, Hal Lawson, Susan Birrell, and John Cheffers. The dance instructors from the initial days were: Betty Toman, Adrienne Hawkins, Judith Chaffee and Christian Polos. The editor of this special issue on The Agon Motif, Ejgil Jespersen, was also an appreciated participant of the program all years.

One of the recurrent themes was “agon” thanks to Loy’s persistent efforts to dig deeper into the phenomenon, and we were also interested in possible universals in the field of physical culture. I proposed that about a dozen physical engagements are shared by all human beings (random order): 1. Being part of a “feed chain”. 2. Being part of “propagation”. 3. Being part in building and enjoying “a dwelling”. 4. “Dying”. 5. Partaking in a form of “communication”, language. 6. “Playing”. 7. “Worshipping”, metaphysics. 8. Enjoying and/or performing “music and dance”. 9. “Hygiene”. 10. “Aesthetics”. 11. “Rivalry”, competition (Ballisager & Damkjær, 2003).

To this rough listing I would like to add: “Humor” and “storytelling”. However, I must admit that those two significant human characteristics do not always include physical engagements. When sharing those thoughts, I am often met by the question: What about the “protection of territory”? – Yes and no. Certainly the recognition of the right of property is evident in many parts of the world.

Nevertheless, with reference to the Loy and Morford paper on “The Agon Motif”, it is of interest to note that when it comes to the arenas for the display of agon it is often in locations where the right of property is not conclusive. Many tribes on the American plains acknowledged that (mother) earth cannot be owned by man. As the air we breathe the earth is universal to all. Certainly, looking into the future, there seems to be no doubt that the protection of property – even “land-grabbing” – will together with the strive for safe water be intensified in many parts of the world.

Agon lost?

In an anthology on “Agon” I edited (Ballisager, 1984), an Icelandic researcher, Thorsteinn Einarsson and I are presenting two Nordic tales about fatal play – possibly with an agonal motif involved.



Illustration 1. Two “Golden Horns”

Source: Ballisager, 1984.

The above illustration is from an engraving in the top circuit of one of the two “Golden Horns” found in Gallehus in Southern Jutland, Denmark, in 1639. The origins of the horns have later been stated being from the 4th to 5th century and were probably used for drinking rituals. Our interpretation of the illustration is that two persons – one at each side – are passing a ball between them. They are, however, taking lethal risks – a teaser, probably the devil itself is interfering! The devil is proving itself with a well-known sign of Lucifer – the hoofs. How real, lethal, the game was cannot be known for sure. Nonetheless, deviations of the game are known from many places in the world and certainly throughout the Nordic history as well as variations of the game is still performed in many recent days’ school yards.

Another illustration below shows a more advanced deviation of the game. It is from the 13th century and belongs to one of the “Icelandic Sagas”. The two players have more balls in their hands and traveling in the air between them. The center player is probably a woman with her skirt taken up in her belt. The small interfering creature, in this case with claw like feet, is in close contact with the players. The presence of a third person is advancing the game indicating a fatal outcome for the loser: The executer with his ax!



Illustration 2. Icelandic Sagas

Source: Ballisager, 1984.

The reviewing of these examples from the Nordic past is to underline that variabilities of combat-games have been a part of our heritage throughout many centuries. In the light of available, recent research as presented by Loy and Morford in this issue it provokes the questions: Are these and related memorabilia illustrations mirroring genuine, deadly games or are they fictive reflections? Do the illustrations imitate the context and atmosphere of agonal Nordic societies often spoken about as “The Viking Period”? Furthermore, is it unquestionable that the (Nordic) agonal era ended with the vigorously fighting Vikings?

Loy and Morford (2019) state that most agonal societies disappeared with the disruptions of the cultures of the plains Indians in North America, the samurais, the Nordic Vikings, the Medieval Knights and other warrior civilizations. A little window is opened though:

To be sure, under highly controlled conditions, some individuals live modified agonal lives as athletes where risk and peer recognition are still important factors. But such specific and bounded recognition has little or no meaning throughout the larger society and the realities of which society the individual athlete must return after “playing” at agon (Loy and Morford, 2019, p. 31)

Moral and character - an atavistic possibility

Throughout works on agon by Loy and colleagues the development and display of “moral” and “character” is front and center. But where does moral and character come from? Is it something divine? Is it a particular kind of moral and character gradually being built through learning situations and the support of peer groups and culminating in the appearance of the supreme agonal fighter? Or is there “something” before that, something to build on? Are we given a hint in the book “Gangster” by Lorenzo Carcaterra (2001, p. 36): “Gangsters, if they are shaped by anyone at all, are chiseled by the women in their early lives.”

From agon-researchers like Loy we have learned that agon tends to exclude females, but we should be aware that rare work has been done on e.g. the Amazons (Wilde, 1999). Where does agonal behavior rank on a scale of ethics? Is the elite agonal fighter an unquestionable good person? Or is the reason for the decline and disappearance of agon – if that is the comprehensive case – simply that it has been overruled by civil law, humanistic thoughts and behavior?

On the other hand, it can be suggested that agon culture is not solely anachronistic; there are still values and practices to be learned from it. In the present Loy and Morford work a little opening is offered in table 5: A typology of agon, masculinity, and social formations. Under the listing: “Forms of Agon” is in the bottom of the figure: “Atavistic” Agon. In the same bottom line the “Type of masculinity” is stated: “Neo-Hyper”

Masculinity, and the “Social Formation”: “Extreme” Fighters. In a recent publication the historian Margaret MacMillan (2015, p. 153) discuss:

“What is it that makes some people more daring than others? Launch themselves into the atmosphere – or into space; climb mountains or squeeze into dark caverns under the earth; risk their lives in extreme sports?”

MacMillan is suggesting some answers – amongst them that the environment plays a big role and that of “the characteristics that risk-takers share, we almost invariably find curiosity.” Later in the same chapter:

“Sometimes people take risks because honor demands it or because they are unwilling or unable to contemplate alternatives” (MacMillan, 2015, p. 162).

Before including a reappearance of agon into any common curriculum the classical characteristics of agon must of course be modified or changed. Thus, how far can we go in a transformation process and still be able to identify an element of agon?

Physical Culture and “idræt”

The notion of “Physical Culture” I met when visiting the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and later in the 80s and also after the revolt in Russia in the 90s was – here in simplified terms – including almost any physical shape or engagement that involved manpower: Sport, art, design, architecture, military, health programs and much more. In center was the conditioning of the body and availability to perform. In later Russian periods these segments have been much more refined along with the change of times and the impact of technology in particular.

With this learning from past decades in memory I still appreciate the panoramic view of seeing all human, physical engagement as a general sign “in” and “of” a society. When taking responsibility for physical education programs I did, however, diversify and define the magnitude of engagements. In my work an important framing was: “Physical Culture as play, game, sport – and dance”.

On a short historical note, it can be of interest once again reviewing the old Nordic word for athletics – or with a modern word sport – which is “idræt”. The good reason for making this little etymological detour in a text about agon is that the word essentially means striving, “id”, toward being the best: “drott”, “id-drott” – now a days in Danish spelled “idræt”. Thus, idræt developed overlapping with the activities the Vikings enjoyed on their tours and on home turf. All in all, it gives sense observing idræt as a part of the general physical culture – and even asking if it includes or should include a survival of an agonal element.

Agonal bodies in disguise?

Along with the change and disappearance of numerous bodily expressions other physical expressions are established, and lives are more and more lived in a virtual world – in the mind. Looking through a macro filter constituted by the realms of nature, combat and aesthetics I will finally search traces of agon in society more generally. Can elements of agon be found in civil societies as such? Out of multiple options I have selected three examples – one from each category of nature, combat/competition and aesthetics. When presenting the examples from these domains, which I consider as the main pillars of a physical education program, we should have the essential agonal values in mind (extracts from the Loy & Morford paper): Character, moral, contest, individualism, peer group appreciation, prestige, honor through action, bravery, courage, generosity, modesty, pursuit of excellence, integrity, composure.

In the following matching I will keep open for discussion the influence of “violence” in some form. I will also take into account the role of expressing “humor” and likewise include “the female” in the capability for expressing a (contemporary) form of agon.

Nature

When Edmund Hillary on May 29th, 1953, woke up in the tent on Mt. Everest together with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay he realized that he had forgotten his boots outside. They were stiff frozen and he had to spend the first two precious hours of the day warming them. The small camp was 348 meters from the peak. Compared to his mates Hillary was late in growth. He did, however, eventually mature to being 195 centimeters, and in early life he became a very skilled out-door person and later mountaineer.

Edmund Hillary became one of the first two persons to visit both poles of the earth. He mastered a number of other skills: Being a pilot, expedition leader, philosopher of nature and a moralist – he even was a competent boxer and bee-keeper.

Hillary became part of a global network and received honor and fame from around the globe. He was, however, modest about his performances – a fact Norgay underlined when he was interviewed about the two of them standing on the ice-tip of the world. The now famous picture of Norgay was taken by Hillary, and the Sherpa explained that when he offered to take Edmund Hillary's picture – he shook his head in refusal.

In later reflections Edmund Hillary stated that he somehow regretted adding to the pattern of climbing the highest mountains of the world. He replicated over the impact of waste and wearing down of nature and gave his support to cleaning up actions. He also engaged in philanthropic and humanitarian programs around the world.

In World War II Hillary joined the RNZAF (Royal New Zealand Air Force) as a navigator and acted in numerous missions. Later in life he became a politician and supporter of the New Zealand labor party. He became a keen writer and received numerous recognitions – most notable the “Commander's Cross of the Order Merit”, which he wore at a visit in Warsaw in 2004. Sir Edmund Hillary died in 2008 (Krakauer 1997; and Wikipedia).

Combat:

When on trial in 1964 Nelson Mandela made his own final statement. A short extraction from the end of the five hours long speech:

“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die” (Meredith, 2005, p. 127).

On June 12th, 1964, Mandela, forty-five years old, was sentenced to life imprisonment and put on the ferry to the penitentiary on Robben Island. Numerous times Mandela had set his life at risk. Before being put in jail he was a strong force in the “African National Committee” (ANC), and had flirtations with the communist party and a new organization: “Umkhonto we Sizwe” – meaning “Spear of the Nation” – and believed at a time that violent means could not be avoided:

“When all channels of peaceful protests had been barred from us, (that) the decision was made to embark on violent forms of political struggle” (Meredith, 2005, p. 126).

The months until he was captured Nelson Mandela were hunted in numerous ways. His life was imprinted with fight and violence. His upbringing was in a very modest village, but in spite of all odds he made his way through schools and became a lawyer. Besides succeeding academically at university Mandela became an elite sportsman and excelled in boxing and track and field, a fact that helped him in prison enduring physical assaults and torture and keeping up his fate and spirit.

From prison Nelson Mandela managed staying in contact with the outside world, and sympathy for his struggle for democracy spread. In 1982 the government eventually decided to move him to a prison on the mainland.

During the growing tensions and economic crises in the mid-eighties Mandela persisted in opening for a dialogue with the government and president P. W. Botha. However, Mandela underlined:

“He was not interested in his own release unless it was part of a package of measures that included the lifting of the ban on the ANC” (Meredith, 2005, p. 433).

A meeting with Botha was finally set for July 5th, 1989. It became a kind of courtesy call, but Mandela maintained his generosity when reflecting: “charming man. The thing that impressed me was that he poured the tea.” (Meredith, 2005, p. 434). Six weeks later Botha resigned and in September his successor F.W. de Klerk was appointed.

February 11th, 1990, Nelson Mandela eventually walked through the prison doors as a free man. In spite of the many years in captivity he was very reluctant speaking about himself.

“Not once did he express bitterness towards the white community for his ordeal, only against the system they imposed” (Meredith, 2005, p. 437).

After 27 years in prison the personal integrity of Nelson Mandela remained profound. Even when receiving the “Nobel Peace Prize” together with his opponent de Klerk he maintained his posture: “I needed him. Whether I like him or not is irrelevant. I need him” (Meredith, 2005, p. 439).

Aesthetics:

Nadesjda Tolokonnikova, Marija Alohkhina and Jekatarina Samutsevitj are the names, however, better known as the key actors in “Pussy Riot”. The Russian trio enjoys close backup by 20-25 devotees and a growing attention from around the world.

The means of the group is music, drama, humor, provocations and gender and with a special ability to attract world attention by picking particular venues for their performances. As individuals and as a group they have endured numerous threats and suffered imprisonment and other forms of punishment. However, the biggest risk-taking seems to be their ways of self-exposure and general criticism of social control and norms. Individually and as a group they have often suffered official social expelling. The relative size of the forces in play is striking – a kind of David and Goliath circumstance. The call for democracy and women’s rights are in center focus and the alliance between politics and the church is heavily questioned (Wikipedia 2018).

Four members of the group were present in the playing field in connection with the final game in Moscow between France and Croatia at “the 2018 World Cup”. Before getting arrested one member of Pussy Riot had a “double high five” with the smiling France forward Kylian Mbappé, a picture that travelled around the world. In association with the event the group stated that their aim was:

“Free all political prisoners, stop illegal arrests at public rallies, allow political competition in the country, and stop fabricating criminal cases and jailing people on remand for no reason” (Warshaw, 2018).

Prior to the World Cup event the group had attracted world attention in connection with the Sochi Winter Olympics, where members of the group also were arrested. Since then several global organizations have stated concern – among others: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation for Human Rights and European Convention on Human Rights. These organizations were joined by distinct personalities like Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Pussy Riot’s performances can either be called dissident art or political action that engages art forms, Tolokonnikova has stated. Other group concerns include health care, and the centralization of power, and the group supports autonomy and grass-roots organizing. Unquestionably the means of the group are physical and aesthetic and with a high degree of risk taking. The motivation is to be found in a balance between personal recognition and peer group attention in forming a tool for better conditions for fellow citizens in general.

Would these three examples qualify into a renewed, more general perception of agon?

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Received: 10 November 2018; Accepted: 11 February 2019