

# ACCEPTING VULNERABILITY: TOWARDS A MINDFUL SPORT PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, I would argue for a mindful sports philosophy that stresses that wisdom does not emerge from abstract thinking; instead, it requires that we become attentive to what is concrete: our everyday life and how we spend it. Do we spend our life wisely or not? Answering this question requires that we know ourselves sufficiently — that is to say, have we explored and examined our own life by paying attention to it while we are living it? Am I aware of how my life constantly intervenes with life in general and vice versa?*

*To exemplify this philosophical approach, I will refer to examples from modern football coaching that illustrate how they play themselves and their team into certain thoughts, not the other way around. However, a crucial part of coaching and leading in sports relies on self-knowledge, not as something that only emerges from the inside out but equally from how the outside affects us. In this paper, I will argue how a mindful sports philosophy understands self-knowledge as both an introspection and “interiosation” of the outside with the quest of becoming worthy of what happens.*

**Keywords:** coaching, mindfulness, self-knowledge, vulnerability

## INTRODUCTION

For the ancient Greek philosophers, philosophy and self-knowledge were connected.

Simone Weil writes: “Know thyself” was among the Greeks a precept that has become a proverb and that was written up at the entrance to the temple at Delphi, which was the repository of all wisdom. What sense could this saying have had? It seems that it meant: ‘Why do you have to come and ask me about the secrets of nature, of the future? All you need to do is know yourself’ (1978, p. 190).

Knowing yourself is also the key in sports if you wish to become an excellent performer. Yet, as a coach, athlete, or team, getting to know yourself requires accepting the vulnerability of not knowing and exploring what is. Weil lists several ways of understanding self-knowledge as either a means or an end; for instance, knowing oneself to change, regulate or correct oneself versus gradually getting

to know what one is capable of through actualizing one’s potential. Here I will understand self-knowledge by referring to both.

In short, it means that philosophical wisdom does not emerge from abstract thinking; instead, it requires that we become attentive to what is concrete: our everyday life and how we spend it, each practice and game, and how we play it.

Do we spend our life wisely or not? Answering this question requires that we know ourselves sufficiently — that is to say, we have explored and examined our own life by paying attention to it and how it intervenes with life in general. For instance, how we play a particular game.

I believe that coaches and athletes — like philosophers — act or play their way into certain thoughts, not the other way around. In this way, playing the game plays a significant role despite the possible obstacles, such as how uncomfortable one might feel facing what happens. Self-knowledge plays a key role in how

the coach makes his or her athletes or team worthy of what takes place to move forward to the next moment. Self-knowledge involves coming to terms with limits and knowing what I (or the team) can do and what I cannot do.

For those who think that the term “know yourself” belongs in the classroom and not on the pitch, the Danish national football coach Kasper Hjulmand (2021) stressed, “all good leadership begins with knowing as much as possible about yourself.” Such self-knowledge clarifies that the athlete or team often are competing against themselves. They need to let go of assumptions, ideals or even hate that hinders a free involvement — that is, to let go of judging and gradually learn to hear and see what is in the process of coming into being. That is, actualizing the real potential. Another football coach, Jurgen Klopp, the Head coach of Liverpool FC, says: “Don’t act like you know everything, be ready to admit that” (Lusby, 2019).

The attitude of accepting one’s vulnerability should not be mistaken for resignation or resentment; rather, it is a courageous act of accepting the now-here. It is a way of standing up to what happens as it happens while one is trying to match it — be capable of experiencing both the good *and* the bad, our strengths and limitations, and unfolding the knowledge that is integrated into each lived experience. As Klopp says: “We need to recognize that players are human beings with problems, and the more you do to address these problems, the better you are going to be” (Lusby, 2019). Alternatively, to be simpler, distinguish between the player who plays and the person who plays. The coach or player should not identify themselves with their coaching or playing.

In what follows, I try to outline an approach, an *affirmative practice* — a practice that is both playful and humble, yet also critical in a non-judgmental way — that is, not judging beforehand. “One can judge a thought only if

one places it at a distance. Doubt means that the thinking subject is separated from his own thoughts, which he can examine as a result. (If one confuses oneself with some thoughts, one is lost.)” (Weil, 1978, p. 193). The thinking subject is the coach or player when he or she coaches and plays.

In this paper, I blend classical Western philosophy with elements of mindfulness — moving towards a mindful sports philosophy. I will propose that to know ourselves, we do not need to know but to pay attention to and care about what happens. The reason for this postulate assumes that all lives are interconnected. Sport invites the participants to understand the importance of being honest about oneself and one’s relationships with others.

This, in a way, is common knowledge in sports because you never play a game alone.

### *A mindful philosophy*

Mindfulness is a word that comes from Buddhism. It is the seventh element of the Noble Eightfold Path that Buddha developed. It stresses the need for awareness, that is, being alert and attentive.

The capacity to pay attention and cultivate concentrated awareness is needed for several reasons. First, one must accept their vulnerability; many are too afraid to embrace the unknown. Second, many are too preoccupied with being someone — that is, the constant strive for power, prestige, and status dominates their play. These external norms or ideals often make it difficult for the “I” to evaluate how the “self” acted or played honestly. The problem is “the enemy is the relentless ego,” as Iris Murdoch (2001, p. 51) said, meaning that I want to be identified with what gives me status and prestige, even if such behavior does not correlate with who I am. There is certainly room for change and improvements of the self — a person’s potential that is yet unknown, but its

actualization has to be done with respect to a person's current self-knowledge. A third possible reason is that many — especially in the Western world — are being trained in rational and logical thinking, not a more sensitive form of thinking that allows us to experience our vulnerability, fragility, and finitude. The fourth and last reason is that a crucial element in critical thinking is judging, as if the lines between good and evil were black and white, even though many things in life — including on the pitch — are both good *and* evil, right *and* wrong. Take the example of committing a so-called professional foul.

The Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula defines mindfulness in *What the Buddha Taught* as “Right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness) is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive about (1) the activities of the body (*kāya*), (2) sensations or feelings (*vedanā*), (3) the activities of the mind (*citta*), (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (*dhamma*)” (2017, p. 48). It is about waking up to life. Facing what happens both inside oneself but also outside, or how the outside may affect you.

Mindfulness, therefore, is not navel-gazing or self-hypnosis but an awareness of my existence being connected with other forms of existence. It is an experience of how my well-being depends on the well-being of others and vice versa. Everything is connected.

Western philosophy is also a mixture of both inward and outward ideas. For example, classical concepts such as “self-knowledge” and “the care of the self” emphasize this interplay of the internal and external (Foucault, 1990). Furthermore, when a coach or athlete plays well, I believe it is related to knowing your place — that is, whether you know where you are and why you are where you are at this particular moment. I relate this to feeling joyous playing as being comfortable where you are, doing what you do. It can be seen as a

side effect of living a meaningful life where the purpose is clear: to play to our best.

Hjulmand (2021) explains how he tries to deal with pressure, whether externally or internally: “It's about security and love, but also about the fact that I wasn't helped up every single time I lay down. I also had to learn to move on myself.” Pepijn Lijnders, the assistant manager of Liverpool FC, says: “You create this connection of safety through ‘belonging cues,’ all that basically states: You are safe here. No one in football is better at offering belonging cues than Jurgen Klopp. Fist bumps, hugs, smiles, embraces, he displays the whole gambit ... Jurgen creates a family. We always say 30 percent tactics, 70 percent team-building” (Klopp, 2017).

A family is a symbol of a safe space and one of trust and love where athletes can let down their amour of being invulnerable. They are free to become.

It also stresses that the self or the feeling of what we call “I” is an illusion. There is no inner essence or master model. For example, I play, but I am not only a player; I think or feel but cannot be identified with my thoughts or feelings. Instead, I play differently over time because the self is a change process due to what affects the self, how I gradually get to know myself better, and my strengths and limitations. Knowing yourself is also knowing that you will never gain full knowledge or insight into who you are. Still, you can gain sufficiently to know where you have been and qualify your guesses about where you are going — that is, what you are in the midst of becoming. You gradually become wiser in dealing with unexpected situations.

There exist many definitions of what philosophy is in the Western world when we move beyond the mere definition of a lover or friend of wisdom. Still, I believe that the point is that without love, we cannot think philosophical-

ly. Love is what gives philosophical thoughts their vitality and strength. The next question is, then: What does it mean to think philosophically and not just think about what to cook for dinner or wear tomorrow?

According to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1994), who, together with his friend and co-writer, the psychiatrist Félix Guattari, philosophy is the act of creating concepts. Examples could be Nietzsche's "Will to power" or Descartes's "Cogito ergo sum." A concept is more than a neologism. It is a particular way of thinking due to certain circumstances. For example, if God is dead, we, according to Nietzsche, need creative will of power to create new life values. Philosophical thought brings us closer to life because the power of a concept depends on how much life it carries. Thus, philosophy in this spirit is not an abstraction but a concrete, sensitive and reasonable bond to the world.

I suggest calling this a mindful philosophy. It stresses the foundation of being present or living and playing with attention. In other words, before we may be able to create concepts — or new ways of playing — we need to be aware of what is happening and constantly be on the lookout to acknowledge the problems that we have to overcome, for example, by the invention of a concept that can bring us closer to life — the actual game — and helps us leave behind what hinders life from flourishing.

In other words, a mindful philosophy is an attentive love affair with life. It is a careful and aware approach to life that transforms us. It is an affirmative and liberating practice. Is this asking for too much when it comes to sports?

No. I believe it is evident that the best coaches, athletes, and teams love what they do. If not, they should be doing something else.

For example, the invention of new forms of play is based on what the athlete or the team is capable of, their potential, and not on how the coach would like to play. Yet, what the athlete

or team is capable of doing — qua potential — is something real but not yet actualized. The process of actualization takes place during the duration of the play. Such a process is about exposing one's vulnerability and accepting that excellence is the result of gradually failing better and better.

### *Affirmative Practice*

An affirmative approach to sports coaching (and life) that consists of four phases:

- to pay attention — live and play with awareness,
- to problematize — accept uncomfortable obstacles or situations,
- to make sustainable decisions, and
- to transform or liberate myself from what keeps me imprisoned.

This approach, I believe, incorporates the best from philosophy: a love of wisdom related to action, that is, where our actions or responses are based on the wisdom we together have acquired, but also a more compassionate and sensitive approach that is found in a mindful way of living.

The first is to *pay attention* — that is, where you intermingle with what happens, carefully unfolding everything, and do so without judging beforehand. For example, Klopp says that when a new player comes to the team, he does not tell him how to play but gives him the freedom to play naturally; then — afterward, the coach might add or change certain things realistically.

The second is to *problematize* — that is, to bring potential decisions out into the open where no road map exists. To know is to get dirt under your nails. You do not become a cook by watching a cooking program on television but by sticking all of your body, mind, and senses into the dough. The same goes for becoming coaches, players, or leaders. This hyper-attentiveness, awareness, or mindfulness enhances your power to be affected — affected by life,

by the actual game, or try to make the team more flexible in order to integrate and benefit from the player's skills.

The first two steps are intimately related because to problematize is neither to position nor oppose. Instead, it is a process of exposing yourself, making yourself vulnerable, and gradually acknowledging your limitations or failures and strengths and successes.

Klopp emphasizes this when saying, "Football is a mistake game. Without mistakes, you can't play" (Lusby, 2020). Through playing, the players and the team grow; however, playing in a way where mistakes are accepted, even encouraged. "Our team," Klopp says, "should enjoy being in a high-pressure situation. Enjoy the ride; let's fasten our seatbelts and let go" (Billingham, 2019). Similarly, Hjulmand (2021) stresses: "Young talent needs two things: on the one hand, an emotional security where they know it's ok to make mistakes. They need to know that we care about them for the people they are, and as long as they live by our values, then everything is OK. On the other hand, you have to make it hard for them. Put up some obstacles that you know they can barely handle."

Trusting your training equals trusting your current self-knowledge that brought you here and having the courage to gradually test and gradually expand the player's comfort zone.

Such an approach is not guided by an already existing ideal or norm. Actually, the coach tries to give the players and the team room to overcome themselves — becoming someone else, hopefully even better. This approach, where mistakes lead to improvement, resembles the Japanese concept of "kintsugi" (golden joinery), which refers to the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending areas of breakage with some powdered gold, silver, or platinum. The breakage and the repair (or the relation between things) become a part of the history of the pottery rather than something to disguise.

An affirmative approach, therefore, does not follow an objective or predefined goal; instead, it ends all goal setting to be present. We are constantly asking: What is important now? What is the right decision now, given my knowledge and circumstances here and now? To learn is to bring the unconscious out; that is to say, becoming always takes place as an examination of a certain experience. It is a relational competence. To become better at playing is, like living a life worth living, never to reach a conclusion; instead, it is to stay patient with open questions. It is an inconclusive process that might, at first, appear hard — mainly because we are so trained in goal setting — but it is a part of becoming free. Another way of expressing this is a direct insight or relationship with life, pure, unmediated attention.

In continuation, the third element is the *decision-making* that follows the previous steps. A sustainable decision refers to the decision you will keep on taking, again and again, with the kind of insight you have. What is the right thing to do here and now? And then having the courage to execute that decision.

Paying attention helps problematize, which clarifies the possible choices. The point is that by paying careful attention with a curious, critical, and open mind, you are able to create choices that you might not have thought were possible. To problematize and pay attention can help you make sustainable decisions, the kind of decisions you would not mind repeating based on your current insight. A sustainable decision is basically one worth repeating. It is one that helps you know what is important — that is, what to focus on, and where to put your concentration and energy. Deciding is a way of liberating you, leaving behind what is no longer relevant, what drains and imprisons your play to bring into life something more fruitful (i.e., what you find important and will focus on). To put it simpler, it is to strip oneself from past suc-

cesses or best practices because these will hinder free and direct contact with life with what takes place. As Hjulmand (2021) says: “A period of much success can be dangerous. We can very quickly be overtaken if we underestimate the competitors. I hate if a person or organization talks itself up at someone else’s expense.” Taking responsible is a constant practice of responding appropriately to the challenges of the present moment. This includes all. “Everyone is responsible for the performance of the team. Whether you are on the bench, you are back-office support staff, or if you are the start striker,” says Klopp (Lusby, 2019).

The fourth step is a *liberating transformation* related to philosophy, where knowledge transforms. This does not have to be more complicated than learning from mistakes. As Hjulmand (2021) points out: “Learn from what hurts and think about what your response will be next. That goes for everything in life.” How fast do the players recover? How fast is their next game speed?

These four elements (i.e., paying attention, problematization, decision-making, and transformation) are not something abstract but take place in concrete and complex life conditions — during practice and during the game. “We are dealing here with a problem concerning the plurality of subjects, their relationships, and their reciprocal presentation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 16).

A mindful philosophy is pluralistic. It tries to see the game from all possible angles or perspectives — even the ones we could not imagine.

A possible better game exists as something tangible but not yet actualized. The challenge is to intermingle or negotiate with the various forces present in the game, see what they can become, what they open for, and what is possible. Here, the coach tries to awaken the potential of his or her players, not so much by recog-

nizing the performance; instead, by focusing on who the players are, that is, relying on the current level of self-awareness and knowledge. For example, the difference between what the player is doing and what actually is required to match the game being played. Here the process of actualization becomes creative — that is, being vulnerable and acknowledging that excellence requires experimenting, failing, and making mistakes.

## DISCUSSION

An affirmative approach to playing a game or life minimizes the shame of making mistakes because it sees it as an integral part of learning.

Sartre developed the idea of shame as being without the possibility of becoming — that is, growing or enhancing your capability to act. He writes, “Shame reveals to me that I *am* this being, not in the mode of ‘was’ or of ‘having to be’ but in itself” (1993, p. 351). Shame is linked with seeing yourself as a thing, an object, and a tool without the freedom to become. It is like having put oneself in a mental prison. Instead of being ashamed of making a mistake, coaches — like Klopp and Hjulmand — should acknowledge that mistakes are essential experiences for each player’s growth.

Shame can also emerge from feeling like a victim. You are being reduced to an instrument. It is saying, “I had no choice.” The movement forward is acknowledging our vulnerability as we move outside of our comfort zone, paying attention to what happens, and experimenting with what might also be possible to make better future decisions in the next moment. It is an ongoing loop: attention, thinking, deciding, then noticing whether the athlete or team plays more freely. The evaluation of the game does not depend on higher norms or ideals but on what a certain tactical change makes possible.

“We have opposed knowledge to life to

judge life, to make it something blameworthy, responsible or erroneous.” (Deleuze, 2002, p. 35). When a coach or a player blames their decision-making on something else (i.e., X made me do it), they appear to have been acting even though no one, including themselves, actually did act. They were just blindly following norms without considering their relevance in this specific game or situation.

Accordingly, when we feel shame, it leads to sadness in contrast to feeling energized and joyous. Instead of judging ourselves (or the athletes), it would be more beneficial to evaluate our behavior to understand why we apparently deserve these feelings or thoughts. We acted our way into them; we gave them room. It emphasizes the immanent norm of doing only what you would like to repeat. It is a paradoxical way that is an ideal, which means that no one can live up to 100%, but it is an ideal that is lived out in each moment, now and here, convincing yourself that it is better to try, even if you fail, than give up. No babies give up when they try to learn how to walk. Similarly, if you do not want to be a disloyal team player, then act accordingly, constantly striving to do the right thing.

The challenge is not to deceive yourself, for which reason self-knowledge finds its form as knowing. For example, Hjulmand encountered a very critical event when the Danish football player Cristian Eriksen suffered a cardiac arrest during the team opening match in the Euro 2020; the coach could not rely on any institutionalized ways of knowing or behaving. Instead, Hjulmand had to step into existence — to accept what was happening. However, through his way of acting and leading, Hjulmand illustrated how expressing vulnerability, insecurity, and emotions not only showed mental strength but also affirmed that life, *a* life, is what is significant. He became worthy of what was happening.

Such a mindful and philosophical approach is active and socially engaging. You are always

participating in a social setting, either being on a team or playing a game. This is also why affirming is a creative practice, but it must also be created as establishing difference, as being difference itself. Life is a difference. In other words: say yes to life, as Nietzsche said. Therefore, it is not the negative that is the motor.

Furthermore, when life is a difference, there is no one way that life is supposed to go; evolution is not a process with a specific end goal. We often measure our successes and failures against what we think we should achieve (or expect to achieve). Yet, there is no clear trajectory in life. Your approach to life matters because playing a game is how you decide to spend some of your time.

For example, an open attitude means that the coach does not wear certain ideas or norms like an impenetrable raincoat. The coach is flexible; however, not bendable or easy to manipulate. The coach creates spaciousness for that which is in the midst of becoming something else, as if the game is a dance, where decisions are like stepping aside to follow the rhythm of the music and give the players room for their movements. Playing a game is a creative act.

A mindful coaching philosophy opens for a sensitive and intuitive approach that can supplement logical and rational thinking where only what is measurable seems to exist. It emphasizes passion over result because the results are a side-effect of passion play.

## CONCLUSION

I have suggested that a philosophy of mindfulness is a process of becoming *with* reality — that is, the game being played.

Becoming is an ongoing process of paying attention while experimenting with what takes place as a passage from unconscious to conscious, from being ignorant about ourselves to getting to know ourselves better. Since the experience of the present moment

is experimental, accepting one's vulnerability and that mistakes are part of the game is also an encouragement to gradually move forward with a clear mind taking the best possible decision here and now, the kind of decision the coach or player would repeat given their current knowledge. These three steps attest to freedom since they explore what the coaches will do to what they can — game by game, enlarging their capabilities. It is too large a freedom of the body, where the players feel energized.

Every time a coach or a player makes a decision, they should be conscious of what they pass on and what foundations for new creative innovations they open for. The mindful coach wishes to open the game, not its result, but how it may be played. This will make the play less predictable and enhance the chances of winning.

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