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**I'M A PERSON TOO – A NEW PHILOSOPHIC APPROACH TO
UNDERSTANDING THE ATHLETIC ROLE MODEL**

A Thesis in
Kinesiology
by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis recounts and reevaluates the popular and scholarly debate on the athletic role model. It analyzes the most relevant arguments for and against the conception of the athletic role model, and it argues for a new approach. Sport holds an important place in society, and athletes are greatly celebrated. If morally evolving people look to athletes for an instructive example of how to navigate life, then it is important to justify that relation through rigorous philosophic investigation. This investigative philosophic thesis considers both the place of the athlete and sport's ability to develop role models. An interdisciplinary approach is taken, and evidence from literature, law, psychology, sociology, and philosophy is incorporated to construct a broadly-established, widely-applicable approach to understanding the athlete as a role model. Offering fans a means for better discerning which athletes are worthy of reverence, and offering athletes the chance to explore what they believe to be their good life, are essential tenets of the new approach presented in this thesis.

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Introduction

A Win-Win Situation

I stood there in a great lake of navy blue and white in the middle of a concrete jungle on a crisp, early fall afternoon. The air smelled like falling leaves, broken peanut shells, and cheap beer. A man emerged from a far off horizon, and as he rose seemingly from below the earth's surface, a voice from nowhere bellowed, "Now batting, shortstop, number two, Derek Jeter." As a baseball player and fan growing up in New York City during the 1990s, my maturation as a person aligned perfectly with the maturation of Derek Jeter's illustrious career.

Despite my childishly chubby frame, completely inappropriate for playing middle infield, I pleaded with my little league baseball coaches to let me play the same position as Jeter, my athletic role model. When a ground ball came to my right hand side, I would purposefully time my movement so that I could mimic Jeter's signature leap-and-throw tactic to snag a ball "in the hole" and throw the base runner out at first. I had his batting stance seared into my kinesthetic memory. I not only owned his jersey, but also a t-shirt that resembled his jersey for more informal, relaxed occasions.

I feel very lucky to have selected Derek Jeter as my athletic role model. As New York City's handsome poster boy for athletic success during the 1990s and 2000s, Jeter handled all of his various accomplishments with a remarkable amount of grace, something not easily done. ESPN anchor Karl Ravech's career coincided with Jeter's, and in a reflection on the career of the Yankee's skipper, Ravech (2014) said about him, "There is a reverence he has earned through hard work and hustle. He has handled his business as well as any player ever has." Players the caliber of Jeter are rare, and as such, role modeling experiences like mine are more the exception, rather than the rule.

For example, if I had selected Jeter's teammate and New York Yankees infield partner, Alex Rodriguez, my experience would have been quite disastrous. While a member of the New York Yankees, Rodriguez was investigated by Major League Baseball for his participation in illegal, high-stakes, violent poker games, and he admitted to using steroids supplied by a fake Miami doctor (Matthews, 2011; Weaver, 2014). The stark difference between the examples set by former teammates Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez begins to point to the difficulty in forming role modeling relationships with athletes.

The following philosophic investigation was initially inspired by the question of, "Are athletes role models?" That question though, is not well formulated, as it presupposes a dichotomous answer in the affirmative or negative, leaving limited room for further inquiry. The question of whether or not athletes *are* role models also carries with it a problematic bias, a popular assumption that the answer is affirmative, again restricting any avenues of analysis. "Are athletes role models?" is a question of status quo, a descriptive question, a question about the way things are right now. A more appropriate question though to drive a philosophic investigation is, "Should athletes be role models?" The more philosophic question of *should* addresses the underlying reasons for and against designating athletes as role models. Does sport build character, and therefore role models? Does an athlete's physical prowess hint at virtuous skill? Depending on an intricate nuancing of the issue, the appropriateness of calling athletes role models should become clearer. It is the question of *should* that will be addressed in this thesis going forward.

The question of *should* will not be qualified with the distinctions of "good" or "bad" for important reasons that will be more fully described later in this thesis. Perhaps the question of "Should athletes be *good* role models?" seems to be a more provoking and controversial question, but that does not mean it is the best question. Similar to the question of *are* the question of *good* presupposes a dichotomous answer, either athletes are good or they are bad. As will be shown in chapter four, actions rarely are so easily described. Furthermore, because those descriptions of an

athlete's actions as "good" or "bad" are often derived more from social convention than rigorous ethical deliberation, something that will be shown in chapter three, those descriptions are far from conclusive and cannot be treated as normatively sound. Maintaining a normatively neutral conception of the athletic role model from the beginning of this investigation has its benefits.

The most important benefit of beginning with and maintaining neutrality in the discourse of the athletic role model lies in encouraging the shedding of dichotomous and dualistic modes of thinking. Thinking that results in dichotomies and dualisms has significant limitations, a fact that will be further discussed in chapter two. Once thinking has shed the shackles of approaching binary outcomes, a more nuanced understanding of issues can be ascertained. The issue of the athletic role model is admittedly a complex one, and if a neutral conception of it better addresses those complexities, then it is a neutral conception that should be used going forward. While it might be difficult to resist the urge to color the athletic role model as "good" or "bad," if doing so means a better understanding of the athletic role model and the fan's relationship with it, then resist we must. Sport, due to its widespread significance, demands our best efforts.

The institution of sport, in all of its iterations, reaches around the world and involves athletes of varying skill levels. This thesis will specifically address the professional athletic role model. The professional athletic atmosphere is a very different one than the collegiate, high school, or youth one. An athletic environment infused with large economic motives and corporate pressures, as will be discussed, changes the way in which professional athletes are seen by others and see themselves. In the course of this investigation, issues related to gender and race will inevitably arise, especially in chapter one. While there is much to be discussed as it relates to role modeling for specific peoples (minorities, genders, socio-economic classes, and sexual orientations, for example) this thesis will not exhaustively address those specific kinds of athletic role modeling. The athletic role model, in this particular investigation, is defined as a professional athlete whose behavior is emulated by others.

The idea that the behavior of athletes has an effect on others is a pervasive one. Some athletes are aware of the expectations placed on them because of their celebrated social position. In his acceptance speech after winning the National Basketball League's Most Valuable Player Award, Golden State Warriors point guard Stephen Curry discusses how he tries not just to be the best basketball player, but best person he can be on a daily basis (Curry, 2015). Professional tennis' best player as of this writing, Novak Djokovic, recently shared his views that athletes are "absolutely" role models (Bishara & Davies, 2016). Other athletes such as Charles Barkley recognize the expectations placed on them, but choose not to acquiesce to those expectations (Barkley, 1993). The idea of the athletic role model though, goes beyond athletes and sport, resonating in popular culture, the scholarly world, and it even turns up in the deliberations of the highest court in the United States legal system.

The Vernonia School District, located in northwest Oregon, during the late 1980s found itself combating widespread recreational drug use by its high school students, especially the athlete population. In response to the worries over rampant drug use, the school district implemented drug tests for all student athletes in 1989. In the fall of 1991, a seventh grader at the time by the name of James Acton was prevented from playing football after he and his parents refused to give consent for the school's imposed drug testing.

A legal case was brought against the school, citing violations of the Fourth and the Fourteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution, the Fourth Amendment protecting against unreasonable search and seizure, the Fourteenth Amendment which guarantees "equal protection of the laws" for all citizens of the United States. Intricate legal precedent, which can be found in the written decision from Justice Scalia, indicates that the school's drug testing requirement did not need probable cause, but only had to be deemed "reasonable" by the court. The Supreme Court did decide that the Vernonia School District's testing policy was reasonable, and therefore James Acton and other student athletes would have to submit to the drug testing in

order to play their desired sports ("Vernonia School Dist. 47J v. Acton," 1995). What is most interesting about their decision is part of the court's argument for the reasonableness of the school's demand on athletes.

Much of the Supreme Court's reasoning derives from legal precedent, a concept that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four, but some of their argumentation does not. In the court's explanation for supporting required drug tests for athletes, it states, "It seems to us self-evident that a drug problem largely fueled by the 'role model' effect of athletes' drug use, and of particular danger to athletes, is effectively addressed by making sure that athletes do not use drugs" ("Vernonia School Dist. 47J v. Acton," 1995). The Supreme Court's claim does not come from any legal precedent or empirical research, but it is rather, they claim, self-evident. Chapter two will deal extensively with why the Supreme Court would make such a bold declaration, and why the same belief still holds much broad appeal.

By behaving poorly, many professional athletes from different athletic backgrounds have fully challenged the idea that they are role models. Team athletes, such as running backs Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, were suspended by the National Football League for striking family members (Belson, 2014; Orr, 2014). Decorated American swimmer and individual athlete, Michael Phelps, had his illegal substance use photographed, and was caught driving while under the influence (Macur, 2009; Walker, 2014). In response to Phelps' poor behavior, USA Swimming suspended their most prodigious talent, citing his failure as a role model.

We decided to send a strong message to Michael because he disappointed so many people, particularly the hundreds and thousands of USA Swimming member kids who look up to him as a role model and hero. (Macur, 2009)

Former track star Marion Jones' performance enhancing substance use, and United States soccer star Hope Solo's domestic abuse arrest, both demonstrate that female athletes are not immune from the spotlight of scandal (Shiple, 2007; Sullivan, 2014).

Despite many examples of athletes behaving in a way that should not be emulated, the Supreme Court's decision still stands unchallenged. While the Supreme Court does not demand of the citizens for which it legislates, complete ideological agreement, the court does demand recognition of its decisions. Today, the Supreme Court's belief that athletes should be role models, and treated as such, is also the popular belief. Why, despite examples to the contrary, do we still hold athletes up as role models?

The station of athlete is not the only one to have associated moral and role modeling expectations. Parents, teachers, politicians, and religious leaders all are expected to work their jobs and live their lives in ways that are reasonably worthy of emulation (National Association of Evangelicals, 2012; National Education Association, 1975; United States Office of Government Ethics, 2011). So, perhaps the behavioral expectations put on athletes are directly tied to their profession, their station in life, the fact that they are athletes. What is it about being an athlete though, that instills in us a belief that athletes should be role models? There seem to be two possibilities. First, maybe excellence in one facet of life implies excellence in another. If so, then professional athletes, being the best at demonstrating sport excellence, should be also be quite morally excellent. Second, sport by its nature could instill desirable values in athletes as they progress through the developmental ranks. In that case, professional athletes who have been in sport almost their entire lives, should consistently practice and promote values such as discipline, team work, leadership, and respect. The popular conception of the athletic role model seems to rest on the two assumptions that there is a *transfer of excellence* between athletic and virtuous skill, and that sport instills desirable virtues in athletes and builds their character. Chapter two

will address both of those assumptions in greater detail. Even a quick, introductory analysis of the issue at hand reveals a tricky, tangled topic.

The concept of role modeling is a broad one, and the issue has been taken up by multiple academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, history, and philosophy. As will be shown in chapters one and two, each academic discipline has provided a novel account of the athletic role model. Leaving out such varied accounts would likely hand-cuff the analysis in this thesis. Given the far reaching, sometimes dauntingly expansive nature of role modeling, a complementary interdisciplinary approach will be heavily relied upon in the process of finding relevant evidence and critiquing possible answers. As University of British Columbia kinesiologist and sociologist, Patricia Vertinsky (2009) stated in her article on the gap between the social and basic sciences in kinesiology, “in a socially and technologically complex society, many problems require interdisciplinary solutions” (p. 41). The consideration of findings derived from various disciplines can facilitate the gathering of facts, developing pointed reasoning, and constructing sound arguments (Kretchmar, 2005).

After briefly discussing and introducing the topic, a history of the modern professional athletic role model will be provided in chapter one. The first chapter offers an historical, descriptive account of how professional athletes in the United States have been viewed as role models since the turn of the twentieth century. Chapter one serves as a narrative welcoming into the thesis, telling a story of how professional athletes came to be seen as role models in modern American sport. In chapter two, evidence from a wide array of sources will be considered in establishing the prevailing views on the topic of athletic role models. Evidence of a philosophic, historical, sociological, psychological, and popular nature will all be introduced.

In chapter three, the most pertinent philosophic views on athletic role models will receive a nuanced critique, with the goal of opening up and establishing possible avenues of thought for the new philosophic approach presented in this thesis. As will be shown, the new approach aligns

quite well and can be supported by existentialist thinking. In chapter four, that new approach is elucidated, and a pluralistic conception of the athletic role model is constructed and argued for.

A debate as to whether or not athletes should be role models is raging in both the scholarly and popular worlds. Can the sides better understand each other? Can a greater degree of consensus be forged through rigorous academic analysis and argumentation? Is there a way to ensure more people choose athletic role models like Derek Jeter and fewer potentially get left morally high and dry by athletic role models such as Alex Rodriguez? That is the goal of this thesis. If progress is made towards greater agreement, then the current state of the debate was likely in need of revision, and perhaps there will be room to push the ideas in this thesis even further. If no progress is made, then the ideas and convictions, widely held and legally supported, might be the right ones. Either way, it's a win-win situation, or non-zero sum endeavor.

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the Athletic Role Model in Modern American Sport

In 1993, Charles Barkley emphatically declared in a Nike commercial, “I am not a role model.” With that declaration, American society again confronted the now-explicit reality that the nation’s beloved athletes might not be worthy of looking up to, emulating, or respecting for anything besides their impressive physical prowess (Vecsey, 1993). What did Barkley’s statement mean for athletes, sport, and society? Did his proclamation reflect a new, coming age of the modern athlete, uncompromisingly defiant yet supremely skilled? Had the cultural conviction, built over the preceding century, in sport as a means to build character been ill-founded?

Since the middle of the nineteenth century when modern sport first appeared in the United States, athletes have held a prominent place in the nation’s social consciousness. Athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali had major impacts on society in general—their enduring legacies built on a combination of athletic success and revolutionary cultural impact. The nature of Jackie Robinson’s influence, however, differs greatly from that of Muhammad Ali. The life and career of Jackie Robinson took place prior to the general cultural shifts and schisms that occurred during the Vietnam Era. Muhammad Ali, in contrast, rose to athletic fame during the tense social climate of the Vietnam Era and the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Both Robinson and Ali have received a great amount of social and scholarly attention, but the legacy of Robinson as a role model seems clear in a way that Ali’s role-modeling legacy does not (Ezra, 2009; Gorn, 1998; Rampersad, 1998; Remnick, 1998; Tygiel, 1997).

Robinson desegregated Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947, changing not only America’s favorite pastime, but the tide of racial relations in the United States as well. Ali, propelled by his Black Muslim convictions, advocated a separatist agenda, calling for a distinctly

Black nation. In many ways what Ali stood for and, the behavior he modeled, directly juxtaposed Robinson's image. Beyond their distinct social stances, the quality of Ali's athleticism also differed greatly from that of Robinson. Ali boxed with flair, bravado, and cockiness. Robinson played extremely well, but cultivated an air of humility and reserve. Robinson acquiesced to the behavioral demands of Branch Rickey, because Rickey knew that Robinson's path to success in the once segregated MLB would be found in playing the game the way white fans could at the very least respect. Rickey demanded of Robinson a certain quality of behavior both on and off the field. Ali portrayed a fierce independence, appearing to take orders from no one, and particularly not from a white mentor. Today, Robinson exemplifies the athlete worthy of emulating in both the arena of sport and the broader arenas of life. Ali, while accepted as an important figure in the course of national, sport, and global history, does not precisely exemplify the athlete worthy of emulating. That is not to say that Ali does not have a large contingent of admirers, but Ali's importance stems from his resistance to implicit and explicit behavioral demands, unlike Robinson's acceptance of those social norms. Ali celebrated an uncompromising and defiant identity, while Robinson conformed to the expectations of traditional American sport heroes. Both athletes revolutionized culture and sport, but for very different reasons.¹

Many athletes have broken records, achieved quite impressive physical feats, and gained global notoriety, few stand out in the way that Robinson or Ali did. Unlike Robinson and Ali, Charles Barkley became a modern athletic revolutionary not through heroic actions inside and outside of sport but through his explicit declaration that he should not be considered a role model—that he was not an Ali or a Robinson, and that most other athletes did not meet that standard either. Why, a generation after Robinson and Ali served different factions as different types of iconic role models, did Barkley feel the need to announce he is not the same? Why did he choose to utter that declaration in a commercial for the modern capitalistic behemoth, Nike? Why did both Barkley and Ali choose roles of explicit defiance rather than acceptance, like Robinson?

Are Barkley and Ali part of the same cultural context, the same revolutionary lineage, or do their defiant stances, somewhat similar upon first consideration, represent distinct contexts that merit further nuancing? Is the history of sport as a character building agent and athletes as role modeling products, a history defined by continuity or rupture?

Sport evolves over time. Sport historian Allen Guttman (1978), for example, has noted two major, dichotomous manifestations of sport, traditional and modern. Focusing the historical lens even further reveals an increasing amount of different eras, time periods in which sport changes in the location where it is played, what is played, how it is played, and who is playing it. Most importantly though, over time, the significance of sport changes (Guttman, 2004). By critically looking at sport, changes in its significance to different cultures can be clearly identified.

Clifford Geertz (1972) discovered that a critical analysis of cockfighting in Bali offered a view into the cultural dynamics of the Balinese. Sport can be interpreted with the goal of better understanding the cultures in which it is played. Thanks in a large part to Geertz, such studies on sport are quite common, offering a rich array of accounts on the overlap between sport and society, such as *SportsWars* by sport historian David Zang (2001). Zang offers an illustrative account. Zang looks into the interaction between American sport and culture during the Vietnam Era. Zang argues, that the turbulent times of the Vietnam Era produced an altered quality of American sport, and by extension, a less agreed upon quality of American athlete (Zang, 2001, p. xxi). Can an American consensus on sport be found though, during the twentieth century before the Vietnam War?

American Sport at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Prior to the Vietnam Era, American citizens and social leaders promoted sport and physical culture in general, as a means to develop the self and society. The idea that sport could improve society is seen in the writings of the nineteenth-century British author Thomas Hughes (1895). In Great Britain, the home of modern sport, physical activities such as rugby provided an institution that could develop and cultivate the value of the British citizen. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Hughes argues that physical contests such as rugby, do just as much, if not more to develop the young than intellectual pursuits (Winn, 1960). In a well-known quotation from Hughes' work, Tom Brown emphatically shares his belief that a game is not just a game, in fact, "it's more than a game. It's an institution" (Hughes, 1895, p. 342). In educational institutions such as that of The Rugby School in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, sport evolved into a component of British national identity. The British exported this new concept to the world. The influence of Thomas Hughes, along with Thomas Arnold, the former headmaster of The Rugby School, eventually took a strong hold in the United States (Smith, 1988).

The social leaders of the United States did not adopt the British sport of rugby as a kinetic social good. American social leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did though find commensurate value in promoting a life for their citizens that generally included physical exertion and athletic competition. Elite American institutions of higher education paved the way for the integration of athletics and the development of the whole man.² By promoting an active, sporting life the leaders of American society addressed concerns over an increasingly industrialized landscape.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century brought vast changes to Great Britain and the United States, including industrialization and increasing urbanization. These forces brought with them not only economic dynamism but fears over how society would change

in response to modernization. Would sedentary lifestyles, factory jobs, mass production, and passive consumption affect the American citizen? Would cities incubate physiological and moral viruses, infecting the bodies and souls of American men, women, and children? In response to such fears, many influential American leaders looked to sport and physical culture as a preventative measure against the corruptive ills of modernity.

Historian Mark Dyreson (1989), in “The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s,” contends that around the turn of the twentieth century,

[m]odern American sport had been ‘invented’ to preserve the concepts and institutions of liberal republicanism and to form a unified national culture in a world transformed by the forces of industrialism, urbanization, rapid and massive immigration, increasingly complex and interconnected markets, and the nationalization of social and political relations. (p. 262)

Modern American sport, though derived from British models, became distinctly American in the way it was founded on, and served to perpetuate, American ideals. The construction of modern American sport produced an entity which, according to Dyreson (1989), “could forge a link between activity and contemplation, between material necessity and moral principle” (p. 264). Sport in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, specifically prior to 1920, could theoretically both build the bodies and hone the moral compasses of Americans. Anyone who participated in such a sound social activity would likely be transformed into an upstanding member of society, their character molded by their participation in the unique construction of modern American sport.

The institution of modern American sport, available to all and infused with the belief that it could help ensure progress, fostered a strong sense of an American sporting community. In 1884 an essayist for *Harper’s*, a popular mass circulation magazine, proclaimed,

I do not wish...to run this theory into the ground; I only wish to indicate that athletics are essentially a popular pursuit, conducive to good citizenship, and the cultivation of which, therefore, good citizenship should imply. (Cited in Dyreson, 1992, p. 72)

During this era the concept of the American athletic role model originated. Leaders of American society, such as the ultimate proponent of sport and the strenuous life, Theodore Roosevelt, instilled in the national imagination the belief that sport molded its participants, and the American people first began to look upon the finest sportsmen as exemplary citizens, consummate patriots, and moral exemplars (Dyreson, 1998, p. 25).

An early example of an important, albeit fictional, American athletic role model can be found in Victorian era sport literature. Following the influence of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, American writers picked up on the themes of existential salvation and national development through physical exertion and practice. A struggling journalist, William "Gilbert" Patten, found his muse when he assumed a leadership role in the adoption and adaptation of Hughes' ideals and rhetoric into an American context. Under the pen name Burt L. Standish, Patten incorporated Hughes' beliefs into the budding adolescent literary genre by creating the figure of Frank Merriwell. Patten's character, loosely modeled on "Tom Brown," represented all of the best effects that sport and physical culture could have on a young citizen. In dozens and dozens of formulaic novels set in the world of competitive sports, Merriwell found success, always triumphing in the face of tough challenges and unsportsmanlike opponents. His participation in the character-cultivating enterprise of athletics instilled in him values that guided his behavior away from sport. In Patten's stories, Merriwell does not drink or smoke and lives a generally clean life. Merriwell embodies the Victorian version of the athletic role model.³ The fictional character of Frank Merriwell was not the only one spreading the gospels of sport and physicality at the turn of the twentieth century.

The American press and public categorized Theodore Roosevelt, the dominant political figure of the era who would serve nearly two terms as president, as a living, breathing, grown-up, Frank Merriwell. Indeed, Roosevelt often portrayed himself in such ways. Roosevelt lived, practiced, and embodied all of the tenets and virtues that could be found in the ideal construction of modern American sport and physical culture. Born asthmatic and frail, Roosevelt eventually learned and practiced the manly arts at a young age, going on to engage in outdoor activities such as hiking and horseback riding. Following the stereotypical story of so many American health reformers, going from frail to fit, Roosevelt developed a love and conviction in the power of physical activity in improving a man's condition. The fictional life of Frank Merriwell and the very real life of Theodore Roosevelt demonstrate the development of a strong American conviction in power of sport to produce good men.⁴

The pristine and lofty ambitions for sport of American leaders and citizens encountered challenges between the roaring 1920s and the beginning of the Vietnam Era in the 1960s. During the 1920s an emerging consumer culture altered the cultural conception of sport, supplementing the understanding with idea that sport could provide great entertainment in the day-to-day lives of Americans (Dyreson, 1989). Part of the new entertaining image of sport involved the promotion of specific athletes. The sports media of the time, under the guidance of shrewd, influential journalists such as Grantland Rice, created the sports "star" as a way to compliment the growing consumer culture in the United States (Inabinett, 1994). In the 1930s though, the institution of American sport combated the devastation of the Great Depression on society. American sport endured the economic doldrums of the 1930s, laying the foundations for a return to prominence and appeal leading into the 1940s. As the Depression faded, other cultural tensions took center stage. Diverse religious, ethnic, and racial groups found their own athletic role models in their fights against intolerance and prejudice. For example, Hank Greenberg, Jewish outfielder for the Detroit Tigers, sensed an American resistance to his presence as a prominent athlete in America

during the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany (Kurlansky, 2011). The ethnic and racial tensions bubbling up in the 1930s would become a focal point of the American sporting consciousness moving into the 1940s.

Initial Challenges to the American Athletic Role Model

Before the 1940s arrived, the success of track and field star Jesse Owens forced Americans to consider the factor of race and ethnicity in their conception of sport. Following his tremendous success in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the American sports media held up Jesse Owens as a symbol of American ideology and power. Upon returning to the United States, Owens experienced a tremendous amount of difficulty making a living, due primarily to his identity as an African American in a segregated American society (Baker, 2006; Davies, 2012). In the 1940s the aforementioned Jackie Robinson would take it upon himself to further challenge the American conception of sport and who could be an exemplary athlete. By not only playing in the MLB starting in 1947, but by playing it in a blue collar, humble manner, Jackie Robinson forced Americans to incorporate racial difference into their ideas about sport and athletes. Robinson did not shatter the foundations of the American conception of athletes as role models, as some of his successors would (Tygiel, 1989). Gender also found its way into the American conceptions of sport and athletes with the rise and success of athletes such as multi-sport success Babe Didrikson, English Channel swimmer Gertrude Ederle, and boundary-breaker Althea Gibson (Freedman, 1999; Gray, 2004; Mortimer, 2008; Van Natta, 2013). The influence of Gibson stands out from that of other women and African American athletes. Her life and career represents one of the first potential ruptures in the rhetoric of the athlete as role model.

Althea Gibson broadened the American conception of athletes by successfully desegregating both professional tennis and golf in the 1950s, further undoing the historical white,

male hegemony of American sport. Not only did Gibson find room to play and find success, primarily in professional tennis, Gibson challenged how women should play in sport by bringing a powerful style of performance to the court, reminiscent of Serena Williams' later demonstrations of prowess. As Gibson gained notoriety, African Americans saw her as a potential role model, a champion for their cause to achieve full social equality in a United States still home to Jim Crow laws. Gibson though, chose not to assume the position of role model and champion for African Americans in the United States and she experienced backlash for it (Lansbury, 2001, p. 234). Despite representing two social and sporting minorities, being a black female athlete, Gibson did not follow in the footsteps of Jackie Robinson, demonstrating a deviation from the conception of the athlete as role model, at the very least, in the African American community. In the 1950s one of the first potential ruptures in the rhetoric of sport as a character builder and athletes as role models can be identified. That rupture though, brought on by the athletic success and social independence of Gibson, did not necessarily undo the underlying American desire for sport to shape people into great citizens and for athletes to serve as social exemplars.⁵ During the Vietnam Era, Americans would experience an all-out assault on their ideals of what makes an exemplary athlete.

Vietnam Era Effects on American Sport

The dawn of the 1960s brought with it the rise of cultural forces that would go on to alter the American conceptions of both sport and athletes. In *SportsWars*, sport historian David Zang (2001) attempts to explain how those novel cultural forces, which emerged in the Vietnam Era of the 1960s and early 1970s shifted the cultural views of Americans on sport in general and the idea of athletes as role models in particular. Zang's thesis involves two prongs. He first claims that following the Vietnam Era, "people no longer trust sport to be the surest carrier of good

character,” and that athletes saw themselves differently within the debatably virtuous enterprise of sport (Zang, 2001, p. 157). The good character that sport supposedly built prior to the Vietnam Era, a quality of character primarily, “defined by Victorian sensibilities—and enshrined in sporting ideology,” Zang argues, “was destined to be archaic in the twentieth century, a time when the idea that one *becomes* surrendered constantly to the idea that one *is*” (Zang 2001, p. xxi). Zang contends that sport lost its character building potential in the Vietnam Era as athletes began to see themselves as unique individuals not in need of athletically cultivated, moral and social virtuosity. Athletes in other words, did not play sports to become better people, or become role models, sports was rather a kinetic means to express their unique personal identity.

Zang presents a variety of different accounts that he asserts reinforce his thesis on the revolutionary quality of the Vietnam Era on American conceptions of sport and athletes. Perhaps the most exemplary of his accounts ties together the stories of American wrestlers Dan Gable and Rick Sanders. The career of Dan Gable, for Zang, represents everything that sports stood for before the 1960s, a means to develop one’s character and also a display of that character, in the case for Gable, both on the mat and off of it. As Gable rattled off a tremendous slew of victories, “despite his kinesthetic genius...most accounts focused on one thing; his over the top effort” (Zang, 2001, p. 31). Gable’s style evoked the older messages about the nature of success and virtue touted in the legions of Merriwell novels. The union of humble effort and intense devotion to sport yielded success. Gable’s consistent trend of winning proved the validity of that culturally contrived algorithm for athletic success. Rick Sanders though, by being himself, sought to disprove the same algorithm, or at the very least, construct his own.⁶

According to Zang, for Rick Sanders, “wrestling ‘was in his soul,’” it became, “a place where Sanders ‘had an opportunity to compete and be someone’” (Zang, 2001, p. 32). Sanders did not become a different person when or through wrestling, rather wrestling provided the opportunity for Sanders to be his true self, stripped down to a kinesthetic manifestation of his

soul, his unique identity as a person. Despite besting Gable in their only head-to-head match and succeeding in international competition, “Sanders was in Gable’s shadow at the end of the decade” (Zang, 2001, p. 35). Gable satisfied the conventional understanding of sport as a meritocratic world where athletes of high character succeed. Sanders challenged the conventional understanding, and, “at a point in time when fun was seemingly everywhere in youth culture except in organized sports, he was fresh air” (Zang, 2001, p. 49). Gable found greater social acceptance as an athlete during the Vietnam Era because he stood for what his country supposedly stood for, integrity, success with work, and leadership in action. Sanders, through his wrestling, embodied the counterculture of the Vietnam Era, choosing to preserve his sense of self in the face of nationally promoted cultural homogeneity and political acquiescence.

If Zang correctly accounted for the impact of the Vietnam Era on American ideas about sport and athletes, then following the Vietnam Era a new rhetoric on the nature of both sport and athletes should be clearly identifiable. The coverage of modern sport media, essentially a small contingent of eloquent sports fans employed to represent the national many, should reflect the post-Vietnam Era understanding of sport as primarily athletic entertainment. By analyzing the views on the athletic role model in popular American sports media, a more nuanced understanding of the effects of the Vietnam Era on American athletic ideals can be reached. The popular views on the athletic role model, according to Zang, should involve a new, modern vacation of the belief that sports builds character and that athletes are role models, producing a permanent rupture in the rhetoric on the relationship between sport, athletes, and virtue. Zang cherry-picks an example from popular culture during the 1970s that supports his thesis, but a broad survey of the commentary on athletic role models reveals something much less consistent with his claims in *SportsWars*.

Post-Vietnam Era Appropriation of the Rhetoric of the Athletic Role Model

Zang concludes his work with a personal interpretation of the 1976 movie *The Bad News Bears*. The popularity and peculiarity of the movie, for Zang, demonstrates the firmly established discord in the discourse on sport's significance in society. After watching an irredeemable hodge-podge of miscreant baseball players scuffle their way to second place, Zang concludes that America has witnessed the allegorical revision of sport in their country.

It was this moment—the closing scene in 1976's *The Bad News Bears*—when it was apparent that we had gone through the looking glass, fallen down one hole and pulled ourselves up through another into a new world of American sport. (Zang, 2001, p. 140)

He describes this “new world of American sport,” the world depicted in *The Bad News Bears*, as one where “games often exist more for the super-hyped after-moment than for their playing,” and where “victory is clearly divorced from honor” (Zang, 2001, p. 154). The 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s have produced some of the most impressive athletic performances, while at the same time those decades have contained within them some of the most recognizable controversies in sport history.⁷ The commentary around and response to those scandals provides a great means for understanding how Americans viewed the role modeling status of prominent athletes after the end of the Vietnam Era.

In the 1980s Major League Baseball found itself confronting multiple issues. Pete Rose, former Cincinnati Red player and manager, holds the record for most hits in baseball, but he, as it stands, will never be enshrined in the baseball hall of fame due to his gambling habits, the details of which surfaced in 1989. Rose violated two rules put in place by former commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis in the immediate aftermath of the 1919 White Sox scandal, prohibiting both betting on your own team specifically and betting on any game in general (Moncrieff, 2007). The response to Pete Rose in periodicals such as the *New York Times*, reinforces the rupture Zang

identified having happened during the Vietnam Era. Columnist Ira Berkow in a 1990 *New York Times* article titled, “A Most Painful Answer,” warns American sport fans to give up their faith in athletes as moral exemplars. Berkow (1990) declares, “It is also said that ballplayers are role models. For hitting and throwing, O.K. But where is it written that ballplayers must be model citizens and more than any other citizens?” (p. B13). In another 1990 commentary in the *New York Times* on the issue of Pete Rose’s gambling feature writer Michael Sokolove shared Berkow’s sentiments. Sokolove (1990) warns us that, “As we watch the games, we should admire the athletes for what they do and ascribe to them no off-field virtues because of their on-field heroics” (p. A27).

Not everyone, however, shared Sokolove and Berkow’s fatigue with believing in athletes as role models. In 1986, Major League Baseball had to handle the emerging issue of recreational drug use by some of its players, many of whom played at the time for the Pittsburgh Pirates. While Sokolove thought players should not be praised for or expected to demonstrate virtue away from their sport, Syd Thrift, general manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1986, thought differently. The Bucs’ general manager installed a program during spring training to educate players on how behave themselves while away from the field. According to an account in the *New York Times*, players received, “courses in such subjects as public speaking, drug abuse, personal finance, and the intricacies of the nation’s tax laws” (“All This and Baseball,” 1986). Perhaps if Pete Rose had played for the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1986, he would have avoided gambling away his money and his legacy. The rhetoric of Syd Thrift runs counter to that of Berkow and Sokolove. Berkow and Sokolove though, better represent the sentiments of many sportswriters and some sports fans while Thrift better represents the corporate interest in athletes both playing and behaving well. In the rhetoric of Berkow, Sokolove, and Thrift both ruptures and continuities in the American ideals of sport and athletes can be found. The rapturous rhetoric of one athlete though, stands on its own.

The Athletic Anti-Role Model

The professional basketball career of Charles Barkley began in the 1980s when the Philadelphia 76ers drafted him in 1984 with the fifth pick overall, after, most notably, Michael Jordan who was drafted third overall by the Chicago Bulls. In many ways, from overcoming childhood hardship to surmounting the criticisms of many experts who thought he did not have the physical shape and skills to succeed at the highest level, Barkley's path to the NBA contained many of the elements of the athletic role model genre that dated back to the Victorian Era. This late twentieth-century, real-life, African American version of Tom Brown started his long journey to the NBA in 1963 in his hometown of Leeds, Alabama. As a youngster Barkley faced the realities of growing up as a poor minority in the Deep South. In his first autobiography, *Outrageous: The Fine Life and Flagrant Good Times of Basketball's Irresistible Force*, written in 1992, Barkley recounts many didactic tales about his upbringing, about his family struggling to make ends meet, about a strained relationship with his father, and about many of his close friends succumbing to the ever-present criminal influences in Leeds. Barkley also shares stories about his basketball career in *Outrageous*.

One night while playing a game for the Philadelphia 76ers against the New Jersey Nets, Barkley endured vocal assaults from a Nets fan in the stands underneath one of the baskets. The verbal jabs provoked a reaction from Barkley. The "Round Mound of Rebound," as the press had nicknamed him, lost his composure and spat in the direction of the unruly fan. Instead of striking the intended target, Barkley's spit hit a young girl seated nearby. In *Outrageous*, Barkley expresses great, and Tom Brown-like, remorse about the incident. That failure to meet his duties as a role model,

helped me learn about limits...and the extent to which my actions can cause so many people to think that Charles Barkley's an idiot or some asshole who has no respect for kids and

doesn't care about what anybody thinks about him. That couldn't be any further from the truth. (Barkley & Johnson, 1992, p. 23)

The quotation reveals that Barkley has an understanding of his place as a potential role model, demonstrating the undercurrent of desire on the part of not only sports fans but for athletes such as Barkley to serve as moral exemplars. Despite an understanding of how society expects athletes to be role models, Barkley chooses to disregard those expectations.

In a 1993 television commercial Barkley changed his tune and radically challenged the idea that athletes should be role models. As black and white images of Barkley playing basketball flash across the screen, Barkley states emphatically,

I am not a role model. I am not paid to be a role model. I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I dunk a basketball, doesn't mean I should raise your kids. (Barkley, 1993)

Following Barkley's final line, the Nike slogan of "Just Do It," flashes across the screen and fades into the darkness. Does Barkley's commercial represent a continuation of the disruption in the foundations of American sport brought on by the Vietnam Era, or something else? According to Zang, anyone who paid attention to the changing dynamics of sport could have anticipated the Barkley commercial. Barkley's screed just followed the lessons unleashed by the *Bad News Bears*. The public should not look for heroes in the world of sports—they would not find them there. After the Vietnam Era, Americans no longer had faith that sport built character or produced role models. In the 1980s journalists like Berkow and Sokolove reinforced that shift.

However, the old faith in athletic role models had not entirely perished. In 1993, the same year of Barkley's commercial, the *New York Times* published an article titled "The Debate: Athletes as Role Models" by Claire Smith. The article begins by briefly touching on the NBA's newfound desire to paint its athletes as role models following the Barkley commercial. Smith's

article also incorporates the views of baseball stars such as Dave Winfield and Ken Griffey, Sr. The article also quoted former director of Major League Baseball's Players Association, Donald Fehr, who seems to straddle the fence in his views on the role modeling responsibilities of athletes. In one quotation Fehr observes,

It's always struck me as an odd debate, when somebody says: 'You professional athlete, did thus and so and therefore some child or group of children is going to behave less well.' It's not his job to raise someone else's kids. That's the bottom line. (Smith, 1993)

In his next utterance Fehr backtracks somewhat by conceding, "anybody who is in the public eye is foolish if he doesn't recognize that he or she is paid attention to by other people and by kids if you're in sports or entertainment." (Smith, 1993)

Trading Virtue for Profit

Zang's thesis seems to gain credibility as sources demonstrate a general lack of cohesion and presence of confusion when confronted with the dilemma of whether or not athletes are role models. The fact that a tension though still permeates, that there is a degree of indecision, that the debate rages on, reflects both an underlying desire for athletes to be role models, and a conscious knowledge that modern athletes might not be worthy of emulation. The indecision tempers Zang's stance. From Thomas Hughes and *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, all the way through Barkley's "I am not a role model" commercial, both ruptures and continuities in the rhetoric of sport as a character building agent and athletes as role models appear and reappear. In the age of Barkley, the tension in the minds of sports fans as they watched their beloved athletes behave badly provided opportunities for one specific modern entity to solidify its influence. Commercial corporations gained, and continue to gain from the rhetoric that sport builds character and athletes are role

models. While entities such as the publishers of Frank Merriwell stories and Theodore Roosevelt also stood to gain from their use of the rhetoric of the athletic role model, the rise of a global market and powerful corporations fundamentally changes the way in which the idea of the athletic role model has recently been propagated and consumed.

In 1983 Nike signed a young Michael Jordan to represent their company and its latest shoe, designed specifically for basketball players. Jordan, unlike Barkley who the press generally portrayed as a lovable but wayward scoundrel, always carried an air of virtue, along with, according to the historian Richard Davies (2012), “an infectious smile, bubbly public personality, and growing stature as an NBA star” (pp. 335-336). Jordan stood to profit off of his image, as an athlete very much worthy of emulation. In *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, historian Walter LaFeber (1999) details how Jordan’s relatively wholesome image and elite skill, along with the contemporary globalization of sports, positioned the legendary basketball player and the growing shoe-making king, to both profit handsomely.

Jordan and Barkley both entered the league in the same year, both with impressive abilities, but Knight chose Jordan because, as LaFeber (1999) reveals, “the North Carolinian was not only a special player, but a respected person with good values instilled by strong parents” (p. 63). Nike capitalized off of Jordan’s image as a talented player and role model as well (Katz, 1994). While a large faction of American sports fans might have had reservations about looking up to role models, their latent desires for such a quality of upstanding athletic citizens likely played into their decision to purchase “Air Jordans,” as the marketing geniuses at Nike dubbed Jordan’s eponymous line of sneakers. The success of Jordan's line of sneakers holds utility in understanding the novel interactions between corporate entities and the concept of the athletic role model.

Media culture scholar Douglas Kellner (1996) interprets the success of Michael Jordan as it relates to sport in the form of modern spectacle. Using the thought of French Marxist theorist

Guy Debord, Kellner argues that modern sport has taken on a spectacle's characteristics. A Debordian spectacle is a media event that encapsulates the values of society, acclimatizes its members to the specific culture's way of life, and highlights certain social tensions. Kellner, rightly so, fits sport into Debord's concept. In his article titled "Sports, Media Culture, and Race—Some Reflections on Michael Jordan," Kellner touches on the public relations difficulties Nike faced when news of their unsavory production practices surfaced. As a corporate extension of Nike, Michael Jordan faced social backlash and critique related to Nike's business ethics. Kellner's point demonstrates that the cultural perception of Michael Jordan's character was more closely tied to a corporation than to Jordan's own day-to-day behavior (Kellner, 1996). While the rhetoric of the athletic role model might have lost most of its virtuous content following the Vietnam Era, it gained strong commercial ties and power, as evidenced not only by Michael Jordan's economic gain, but Barkley's as well.

Nike profited not only off of seemingly wholesome athletes such as Jordan, but also controversial ones like Barkley. Barkley's anti-role modeling statement came in an advertisement to sell a product, connecting the potent influence of commercial forces to the modern American ideas about sport and athletes. The commercial appeal of Barkley's "I am not a role model," could be historically connected to the previous emergence of counter-cultural forces during the Vietnam Era, but the modern appropriation of the counter-culture rhetoric to sell products seems quite novel at this stage, during the career of Barkley.⁸ The counter cultural ethos of the Vietnam Era, defined by a stance firmly against the divisive power structures and cultural homogeneity of the 1960s and 1970s, does not resemble that of Barkley, who used his counter cultural stance to clearly facilitate his own financial gain, and to a less evident extent, defend the modern athlete against illogical attacks on their character. The rhetoric of character-constructing sport and its virtuous athletes seems at this point in history to be under the control of large corporate entities.

When the ubiquitous modern media and police caught Michael Phelps, American aquatic phenom, participating in illegal behavior, USA Swimming came out and publicly denounced the actions of Phelps. In a *New York Times* article on the out-of-the-pool controversy surrounding Phelps in 2009, USA Swimming shared their reasons for breaking ties with Phelps, saying,

We decided to send a strong message to Michael because he disappointed so many people particularly the hundreds of thousands of USA Swimming member kids who look up to him as a role model and hero. (Macur, 2009)

Corporations that stand to gain from the idea that sports builds character and that athletes are worthy of emulation, and also stand to suffer when athletes behave poorly, hold relevant power when it comes time to judge whether or not athletes are role models.

Yes, Zang's thesis holds water in that it finds an important rupture in the rhetoric of sport and the athletic role model during the Vietnam Era. The careers of athletes such as Muhammad Ali differ greatly from those of Jackie Robinson, in a way that surely reflects the formation of a discontinuity in the American conception of the athletic role model during the 1960s and 1970s. Zang's thesis, however, does not make enough of the underlying, strong desire of American sport fans to support athletes and emulate them. Zang also stops short of paying attention to the novel interaction between the rhetoric of the athletic role model and emerging commercial influences, all of which began prior to the publishing of *SportsWars* in 2001. Sport, in the form of the institution of Thomas Hughes and the invention of Teddy Roosevelt, has lost a substantial degree of its virtuous character. Now, commercial entities such as Nike stand guard over the image of the athletes, seared into the consciousness of American sports fans, ready to edit and alter that image as role models, or not, in the hopes of selling more and profiting greater.

In the next chapter, philosophic explanations will be presented for the affinity of the athletic role model, many of which complement the history of it presented in this chapter. The

current corporate deployment of the idea of the athletic role model aligns with some of the underlying philosophical issues of the debate on whether or not athletes should be role models. Other philosophic dynamics must be highlighted, and their validity scrutinized.

Notes:

¹ As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the topics of race and gender will be left unexamined. Both race and gender merit detailed scholarly discussion, and to give those topics anything less than a full treatment would be a mistake. To reiterate, athletic role modeling as conceived in this thesis is of a general nature. Athletes who are role models exhibit behavior emulated by others. Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Althea Gibson (who are all discussed in this chapter), were role models in the general sense. They also role modeled in a more specific sense, for African Americans during the twentieth century, as well as for women in the case of Althea Gibson. How Robinson, Ali, and Gibson role modeled in a specific sense is a topic for another thesis. A speculative point can be made though as to why these specific athletes had the impact they did. At the beginning of the twentieth century the model athlete was a white male. As is discussed in this chapter, at this point in American sport history during the first half of the twentieth century, the prevailing view on athletes and sport were that they were role models and it built character, respectively. Any initial challenge to the idea that athletes were role models would likely have to come by means of race or gender. When the potential presence of Jackie Robinson loomed in the minds of baseball fans in America, he not only challenged their idea of the model baseball player, but also their model athlete, simply because of his skin color. Today, the athletic role model is not defined by skin color or gender, but rather by performance.

² For a history of how American universities practice and believed in sports see Ronald A. Smith (1988). And for a description of the “whole man” concept see James Thompson (1984). Plato also discusses the value of physical education in the development of the whole man and the construction of a great society in *The Republic*, specifically between lines 403 and 417 (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997).

³ For a history on the impact of Patten’s character, Frank Merriwell, see Ryan K. Anderson (2015).

⁴ For a description of how Theodore Roosevelt was seen by those of his time, see “Theodore Roosevelt” (1919). For a description of how Theodore Roosevelt himself saw sport contributing to the development of the American citizen, see Roosevelt (1890).

⁵ See Podell (1954). In the article Podell claims, on the first page of the article that, “American boys are encouraged to engage actively in team sports. By playing baseball, basketball and football we expect our youth not only to develop physically but to learn cooperation and sportsmanlike competition. They learn to play by ‘the rules of the game’ and are thereby better able to, we hope, to develop into well-adjusted adults—cooperating, competing fairly and living in accordance with the laws of society.”

⁶ See Chapter Two in David Zang (2001).

⁷ Perhaps the best example of this juxtaposition between athletic achievement and ethical worries is the steroid era in Major League Baseball. Barry Bonds' pursuit of the home run record was simultaneously embroiled in worries over performance enhancing substance use. For a thorough review of the steroid era in Major League Baseball see George Mitchell (2007). Many of the

modern sport scandals relate to the influence of performance enhancing methods on sport. Some though, do not relate to performance enhancement. For example, recruiting violations committed by universities have become a frequent topic of debate, and while arguments can be gathered against the institution of the NCAA, currently, unethical recruiting practices stand as a source of scandal. The tremendous career of Reggie Bush at the University of Southern California (USC) has been undone because of confirmed improper benefits offered by the university, and acceptance of those benefits by Bush. For a legal discussion of the scandal surrounding USC see Mary Grace Miller (2011). Lance Armstrong's October 2012 admission of doping rocked not only the ethical core of cycling and sport, but also the role modeling status of athletes. As an elite athlete who also supported the fight against cancer, founding the popular LIVESTRONG movement in the process, Armstrong's rise and fall exemplifies how Americans so often believe faithfully in the idea of the athletic role model, and how quickly those beliefs erode in the face of a scandal. For more information on the scandal surrounding Lance Armstrong see USADA (2012).

⁸ A look into the colorful and dramatic annual reports from 1993 and 1994 (years surrounding Barkley's "I am not a role model" commercial) Nike reveals an overwhelming drive to assume the strongest commercial position. The opening pages of the 1993 report contain language that focuses on domination, not salvation. In reference to the achievement of an athletic record, the report says, "The key to its attainment is strength, not just of muscle but of conviction, a belief in your own mastery to its circumstances. This is the nature of power. It is our inspiration" (Nike, 1993). The 1993 annual report shows that Nike's net income per common share rose 10.2% and the average stock price jumped up 25% from 1992. A black and white image of Charles Barkley sitting on a basketball also makes an appearance in the well-orchestrated annual report. The report seems to prove that Nike's inclusion of Barkley's stance on role modeling was part of an elaborate corporate scheme to sell more shoes, and increase profits, not take any kind of controversial moral stance. What is even more interesting is that after a year of poor financial performance (at least according to Nike's standards) the rhetoric of Phil Knight in the 1994 Annual Report takes a different, softer tone (Nike, 1994). In response to some popular criticism of Nike, Knight says, "We try as hard as we can to build a good company, good in every sense of the word: service, product, advertising, charitable contributions, character and earnings per share" (Nike, 1994). Perhaps the Barkley strategy did not work as Nike wanted it to, or that its effect was very short lived. Regardless, it was part of a marketing strategy, not a moral one.

Chapter 2

“Here is a Theory” – A Survey of the Debate on the Athletic Role Model

Here is a theory. Top athletes are compelling because they embody the comparison-based achievements we Americans revere—fastest, strongest—and because they do so in a totally unambiguous way. Questions of the best plumber or best managerial accountant are impossible even to define, whereas the best relief pitcher, free-throw shooter, or female tennis player is, at any given time, a matter of public statistical record. Top athletes fascinate us by appealing to our twin compulsions with competitive superiority and hard data.

(Wallace, 2006, p. 142)

Embarking on a review of the topic of athletic role modeling poses quite a challenge, as it demands a broad investigative view. In the process of researching the athletic role model, literature from the academic realms of sport philosophy, applied philosophy, psychology, sociology, American literature, history, and law all have shed a unique and essential light on the topic at hand. With such varied sources of input it will be necessary to find some threads to tie them all together.

This chapter will begin by reviewing how sport philosophers have engaged with the debate of the athletic role model. Following a review of the sport philosophy literature, thoughts and arguments from various academic and popular domains will be introduced to demonstrate the far-reaching nature of the debate on the athletic role model. Those various thoughts and arguments do not represent completely disjointed views on the debate, but rather related one, each of them providing a needed perspective on the concept of the athletic role model. The goal of this chapter is to synthesize the prevailing views on the athletic role model, establish possible lines of

critique of those views, and open up room for the new philosophic approach to be presented in chapters three and four of this thesis.

The Athletic Role Model in Sport Philosophy

The sport philosophy literature on the athletic role model addresses the topic from different trajectories. Some sport philosophers have chosen to focus on the issue of sport as a character builder. Others have chosen to hone in on the idea that athletic and virtuous skill are tethered together in a *transfer of excellence* relation. Many have also decided to concentrate on the social position, the context of the athlete as somebody who is highly visible and celebrated in modern culture. Each trajectory has utility in the process of synthesizing the diverse views on the athletic role model.

Each trajectory also takes up one of the three positions in the debate on the athletic role model. The first position is the *affirmative*. These following philosophers and thinkers believe athletes are and should be role models, whether the athlete chooses to acknowledge that status or not. Others don't go quite as far, and instead, occupy the second *tentative* position. Philosophers in the *tentative* position choose to say athletes *can* be role models depending on certain factors. There are also some who firmly believe that athletes are not and should not be role models. These philosophers take the *dissentive* position.

Robert L. Simon (2015), lays out the relevant issues in the debate, bringing up the ties between athletic skill and moral skill, the social context of the athlete, as well as sport's ability to instill values in athletes.¹ Simon takes up the *affirmative* side of the debate, in full support of the athletic role model, claiming that it is not "unreasonable" for athletes to be viewed as such for two primary reasons. First, the behavior of athletes likely has some effect on others. While Simon does not necessarily like this relation, he chooses to acknowledge it has some force. The second

argument Simon raises, he finds significantly more forceful. Simon sees sports as a cultural entity that has imbedded in it an appreciation of certain values such as, “dedication, concern for excellence, and fair play” (Simon, 2015, pp. 235-6). Celebrated athletes, in some way, owe their high status to the respect they garner through their participation in sports, and that respect is founded on sport's value-rich, inner morality. For Simon, if an athlete benefits in life from appealing to and practicing the values that establish the inner morality of sport, then it is not unreasonable for those athletes to carry out the practice of those same values in their lives outside of sport (2015, p. 236). Essential to Simon's argument is the need for coaches, parents, schools, and organizations to help athletes at every stage of their development to understand that sport is about more than competition, the drive for winning, and the distaste for losing (2015, p. 237). Other philosophers have taken quite an opposing stance.

In “Is It Fascistoid to Admire Sports Heroes?” Torbjörn Tännsjö (2000) offers up a different reason for why athletes are so revered in modern society, taking the *dissentive* stance in the debate. Appealing to ideas imbedded in fascist and nationalistic views, instead of to any inner morality of sport, Tännsjö claims that our celebration of elite athletes has everything to do with their prowess, and not their virtue. He coins our affinity for elite athletes “fascistoid” or in other words, resembling fascism. Tännsjö sees fascist tenants in the way fans praise strength and condemn weakness (2000, p. 10). He even goes so far as to say, that if fans somehow uproot their underlying “fascistoid” love for athletes, “there would be little reason to watch them, and barely any point in watching sports competitions” (Tännsjö, 2000, p. 22). Tännsjö and Simon seem to have two starkly different explanations for why athletes are so revered. Either sport builds characters, or predators. Who is correct? Can both be true? The noticeable philosophic gap between Simon and Tännsjö plays itself out in other accounts of the athletic role model.

Claudio Tamburrini (2000) views the issue of the athletic role model in relation to performance enhancing methods. While this particular thesis will not deal directly with the issue

of performance enhancement, the role model argument is often invoked against doing away with restrictions on performance enhancement. Tamburrini in, “What’s Wrong with Doping?” challenges the arguments raised against allowing professionals to employ performance enhancing methods such as doping and scrutinizes the assumptions he sees as driving those arguments. Pertinent to this thesis, he addresses the idea that athletes are social models.

Tamburrini acknowledges that as of *now*, athletes are role models, although, he does not see the validity in common explanations as to why, ultimately landing on the *dissentive* side of the debate along with Tännsjö. Tamburrini brings up the philosophic idea of the naturalistic fallacy, or the false assumption that the way things are is also the way things should be. Tamburrini sees a popular convention of viewing athletes as role models, but does not believe there is adequate support for that convention. He attacks the idea that athletes should be used or relied upon as an instructive means for educating others on how best to live by critiquing the unreasonable “arbitrary delimitations” that turn athletes into role models before others, such as parents. “Successful athletes are indeed social models for the young. But so are parents; nobody has yet proposed to penalize parents who smoke or drink in front of their children” (Tamburrini, 2000, p. 206). Tamburrini admits to the way things *are*, but clearly thinks things *should* be different.

Christopher Wellman (2003) takes a different approach to Tamburrini, and instead sides with Simon on the *affirmative* side of the debate. Wellman explores how the social position of athletes imparts on them role modeling expectations. In the style of a Platonic dialogue, Wellman decides to usurp the personalities of basketball greats, Charles Barkley and Karl Malone, in order to have them serve as interlocutors. In the context of the dialogue, Barkley speaks for the athlete who does not support the seemingly illogical connection between athletic skill and being a role model. Malone argues that, because an athlete holds an important place in society and is always looked up to, all athletes are role models. For Wellman, Malone’s argument carries the day and

external influences, such as the revered gaze of the observant fan, establish the athlete as not just a role model, but also a moral exemplar.

Randolph Feezell (2005) sees the place of the athlete differently than Wellman. Drawing on the account of Wellman, Feezell nuances the account of the athletic role model by describing how athletes can be role models in either a narrow sense or a broad one. The broad conception of the athletic role model aligns with Wellman's case for the moral exemplar. An athlete who role models in the broad sense, "shows us how to navigate our way through life in all sorts of situations" (Feezell, 2005, p. 21). The popular conception of the athletic role model, held widely by those outside of sports, also aligns with the broad view of the athletic role model. Role modeling in the narrow sense though is dependent upon context. In the narrow conception of role modeling, "the emphasis is on the particular role or station in which the supposed role model is involved, whether it is a teacher, lawyer, or baseball player" (Feezell, 2005, p. 21). Feezell argues in support of the narrow conception of role modeling, calling athletes "lusory objects." Athletes as lusory objects have value as they relate to the sports in which they play and succeed. Feezell is firmly against the belief that the athlete's, "life outside of sport is exemplary, noteworthy, or even interesting" (Feezell, 2005, p. 31). Feezell's account occupies the *tentative* side of the debate, claiming that athletes can be role models in a certain, highly limited sense.

Earl Spurgin (2012) enters the scholarly conversation, responding to both Wellman and Feezell. Spurgin bifurcates the idea of the athletic role model, echoing the thought of Feezell. Spurgin's generalism (Feezell's broad role modeling and Wellman's moral exemplarism) is defined by a belief that, "one's behavior more generally may influence others, especially young people, even if one does not desire to be a role model" (Spurgin, 2012, p. 119). In contrast, Spurgin's particularism (Feezell's narrow role modeling) "holds that one has role-model status only if one becomes a role model voluntarily, and that one's role-model status applies only to one's particular field" (Spurgin, 2012, p. 119). Spurgin, like Feezell, alters the idea of narrow,

particular role modeling, seeing purely contextual role modeling as somewhat rigid and of limited use. Media, for Spurgin, plays an important role in how athletes become role models and how we understand them as such.

By publically extending themselves out as role models, often through media coverage and dissemination, athletes choose to become role models. Spurgin calls this view, modified particularism, which holds that, “one adopts role-model status either by taking on roles that make one a role model or by holding oneself out to be a role model” (Spurgin, 2012, p. 121). Similar to Feezell, Spurgin believes athletes can be role models, even in a broader sense, depending on if they publically choose to be. For those reasons, Spurgin’s account takes up the *tentative* side of the debate. What Spurgin importantly touches on, is the athlete’s autonomy in the role modeling relationship, something very much present in the tradition of existentialist philosophy as well. He takes seriously the athlete’s personhood, their distinct personality, something that Wellman and Feezell do not necessarily incorporate into their arguments to a great degree.

Still, though, there is a dichotomous and dualistic thread through all of the aforementioned conceptions of the athletic role model. Each of those conceptions contains a clear divide in one form or another. The *affirmative* position derives much of its support from a division between the world of sport from the real world, the *tentative* side hints at an important schism between the part of the person that is an athlete and the part of the person that is not an athlete, the *dissentive* side creates a dichotomous “yes or no” resolution to a complicated matter, and all conceptions of the athletic role model explicitly or implicitly deal with the split between the public and private lives of athletes. Is a dualistic approach and dichotomous conception of the athletic role model a good one to rely on, though? Kretchmar (2007) argues against employing such approaches and resting in such conclusions. Are we appropriately framing the idea of an athletic role model as one of a black and white, binary nature? Or could a different conception exist, perhaps a more neutral one? If a different conception, a non-dichotomous, non-dualistic

one, neutral one, exists, would it offer advantages to the current dichotomous conceptions of the athletic role model?

It is with those questions in mind that this thesis will continue. But, before attempting to answer those questions, other conceptions and explanations will be explored to further the understanding of the many issues related to the idea of the athletic role model. Examples of both relevant popular and scholarly discourse on the athletic role model will be introduced, always with an attention to how that diverse discourse resonates with the previously mentioned philosophic one.

The Athletic Role Model in Popular Culture

Research into the idea of athletic role model illuminates the widespread sentiments those from every corner of society have formulated, pertaining to the topic. It is quite difficult to go through a day without encountering a thought, opinion, statistic, or image that cannot be connected to the discussion of athletic role models.

While I cannot provide reviewable documentation of my personal conversations, I think it merits mentioning the appeal of my thesis topic to friends, family, and semi-complete strangers. When asked about the content of my master's thesis, my informal interviewees are typically delighted to hear that my topic is accessible, and while they might not have given it a tremendous amount of consideration prior to our conversation, they are quick to form an opinion in a way that they would not be able to on the topic of, say, the molecular phylogenetics and biogeography of threadsnakes (Adalsteinsson, 2008). This anecdotal fact hints at the widespread resonance of the topic, although, more concrete examples substantiate the anecdotal resonance.

In 2015 Universal Pictures released the well-received comedy *Trainwreck*. The film stars comedian Amy Schumer, as a hedonistic journalist working at a controversial popular magazine,

and her foil, Bill Hader as a straitlaced, successful orthopedic surgeon whose patients include elite athletes. During a creative meeting for her magazine, Schumer is asked to cover Hader, who is performing a revolutionary surgery on the Knicks' power forward Amare Stoudemire. While other journalists are excited for the opportunity to write the piece, and in the process interact with famous athletes, Schumer is not.

In response to the assignment from her managing editor, Schumer caustically declares, "I don't know why we treat these athletes like heroes just 'cause they can skate fast or kick a ball in a net, I just think it's weird. No offense" (Apatow, 2015). Schumer, in an admittedly crude manner, voices her disagreement with the idea that athleticism and heroism have any obvious, logical connection. Her argument occupies the *dissentive* side of the debate and sounds quite similar to that of Charles Barkley who stated in his 1992 autobiography *Outrageous: The Fine Life and Flagrant Good Times of Basketball's Irresistible Force*, "Just because I dunk a basketball, doesn't mean I should raise your kids" (Barkley, 1992, p. 305). The arguments of Schumer and Barkley resemble those of Tamburrini and Tännsjö, and they represent the *dissentive* minority in the debate over whether athletes should be role models or not.

In a somewhat dated study from 1999, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed, "a random sample of 1,500 10-17 year olds (771 boys and 729 girls) and 1,950 parents (with children aged 10-17)...over the telephone," and found that 72 percent of those respondents held up famous athletes as some of the most admirable figures in their lives. Parents came in at 92 percent (HJK Foundation, 1990). Where those trends have gone since 1999 is unclear at this point. Perhaps there are now a few more skeptics these days given the recent falls from grace by athletes such as Lance Armstrong, Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Alex Rodriguez, and Oscar Pistorius. Despite dissenters such as Schumer, Barkley, Tamburrini, and Tännsjö, there remains a stalwart contingent of athletes and non-athletes alike, who hold firm to their ideals of the athletic role model.

In response to boxing's current world heavyweight champion at the time of this writing, Tyson Fury, being nominated for BBC's Sports Personality of the Year award, former Penn State basketball player and current psychologist John Amaechi (2015) penned his disapproval of the decision. Upset with Fury's documented "sexist and homophobic comments" Amaechi makes an argument as to why athletes are in fact role models. Amaechi does not consider *should* in his argument, claiming that, "If anyone looks up to an athlete, they're a role model," and even going so far as to say, "being a role model is not a personal choice. It is a purposeful, proactive designation by other people - often strangers - who see you from afar and admire some quality" (Amaechi, 2015). Amaechi's argument resides in the *affirmative* side of the athletic role model debate and echoes that of Christopher Wellman and Robert L. Simon (2015).

Arguments in the *affirmative* vein of Amaechi, Wellman, and Simon, point to an inescapable relationship between the celebrated athlete and the observant fan, as support for the claim that athletes are role models. Arguments in the *dissentive* vein of Schumer and Barkley point to an illogically constructed relationship between celebrated athletes and observant fans. Which side has the upper hand? Or do Spurgin and Feezell hold the superior, *tentative* position, choosing to take up the conditional middle ground in the debate. Perhaps by diving deeper into the potential rationales behind their arguments and moving into more scholarly analyses, we can better understand each position.

The Athletic Role Model in Diverse Scholarly Work

Kaitlyn LeMier (2008), an undergraduate at Minnesota State University, Mankato, wrote an undergraduate honors thesis titled "Relationship Between Athletes and Role Models." Her thesis includes both a short review of literature, as well as an empirical collection of data related to the topic. Her literature review references sport philosophers such as the aforementioned,

Robert L. Simon, but also novel sources of evidence. LeMier (2008) wrote, “The United States Supreme Court decided that even top sports stars did not deserve special treatment” (pp. 3-4). Her statement derives from the 1995 Supreme Court decision in the case of Vernonia School District vs. Acton, already discussed in the introduction to this thesis. As a reminder, the Supreme Court determined that it was reasonable for the Vernonia school district to drug test their athletes, based in part on the fact that it seemed to the court, “self-evident that a drug problem largely fueled by the ‘role model’ effect of athletes’ drug use, and of particular danger to athletes, is effectively addressed by making sure that athletes do not use drugs” (“Vernonia School Dist. 47J v. Acton,” 1995). The Supreme Court completely and unequivocally supports the *affirmative* side of the debate. The language of “self-evidence” as it relates to certain truths that govern people, immediately brings to mind the language in one of the most important documents in American history.

Within the Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers of the United States constructed the guiding philosophy of a nation greatly based off of what they deemed to be self-evident truths, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creators with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (1776, para. 2). Is the athlete’s role model effect really of the same self-evident nature as that of the founding ideological pillars of the United States? Judging by the already easily identifiable dissention, at least in popular culture, the self-evidence of the athlete’s role model status merits close examination, especially considering how it is employed. In the case of the athlete, the supposed self-evidence of their position as role model, ultimately restricts some freedoms by putting substantial expectations and social pressure on them to avoid behavior unbecoming of a role model. In the case of the United States citizen the self-evident truths within the Declaration of Independence open up possibilities and enhance freedoms. Considering the implications of accepting and agreeing upon self-evident truths like those in the Declaration of Independence, the

foundation for such a truth as the athletic role model demands investigation. Given that the claim of self-evidence in the Supreme Court's decision does not contain within it any identifiable rationale, we must look elsewhere for an explanation.

American author David Foster Wallace (2006) waxes philosophic on a multitude of issues, including the revered place of the professional athlete in an essay titled "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart". Tracy Austin's autobiography *Beyond Center Court: My Story* (1992) attracted the eye of Wallace being a former, moderately successful tennis player in his own right and a fan of Austin during her playing career. Austin's prose ultimately underwhelmed Wallace to such a great extent that the blatant incongruence between Austin's physical prowess on the tennis court and intellectual lack thereof demonstrated in the pages of her book, propelled him to pen a pointed critique of the celebrated athlete, finding possible rationales for why we take them to be role models. While Wallace does not take up a distinct position in the debate, his thoughts provide a great investigative lens into the various issues, opening up other avenues of discourse.

This chapter opened with the first prong of Wallace's theory, that "athletes fascinate us by appealing to our twin compulsions with competitive superiority and hard data" (Wallace, 2006, p. 142). Wallace is on to something, especially considering the similar conclusions of contemporary sport scholars. Sport historian Allen Guttman (1978) in *From Ritual to Record* describes the unique characteristics of modern sports, the end result of which aligns quite nicely with the ideas of Wallace. After detailing the seven characteristics of modern sport, Guttman summarizes today's perpetual striving for quantified record achievement by saying,

Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus or from Dante's paradise, we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality.² (Guttman, 1978, p. 55)

Guttman and Wallace both see the importance of how we quantify sport, and use those data to not only separate athletes by the smallest of arbitrary margins, but also attach meaning to those separations. “When we can no longer distinguish the sacred from the profane...we content ourselves with minute discriminations between the batting average of a .308 hitter and the .307 hitter” (Guttman, 1978, p. 55). Guttman believes record athletic achievement confers secular immortality upon the athlete. For Wallace, astounding athletic achievement renders the athlete completely engrossing. In Wallace and Guttman we see two initial reasons for why the celebrated athlete holds such an important place in the general social consciousness of a culture, something that philosophers on the *affirmative* side of the debate often reference. The combination of affinity for competition and quantified difference through the pursuit of numerically defined records, fosters an appreciation for the successful athlete.³ More explanatory arguments can be raised, though.

Wallace brings up another reason for our fascination with athletes, “they’re beautiful...There is about world-class athletes carving out exemptions from physical laws a transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man” (Wallace, 2006, pp. 142-3). Anecdotally, beauty is often discussed in relation to sport. When conversing about the modern scoring prowess of Golden State Warriors point guard Stephen Curry, a basketball fan might say, “His jump shot is a thing of beauty.” What that fan is referencing is not the objective fact that the ball often goes through the hoop when Curry launches from any range, but that the action is aesthetically pleasing, sensually addictive. In the case of Curry,

every time [he] rises up and lets a long-range jump shot fly, it’s one of the most riveting moments in sports. That’s due in no small part to its beauty; it’s so certain in its creative intent that it can feel more like you’re witnessing a work of art than an athletic art. (Goldsberry, 2015)

Aesthetics then, at this preliminary point, seems to contribute to the social reverence of the athlete. The ties between sport and aesthetics have been discussed within the sport philosophy literature. Stephen Mumford, in “The Aesthetics of Sport” puts forward what he calls “the aesthetic hypothesis,” which tentatively establishes, “that aesthetic considerations are essential to the being of sport and continue to shape its development” (Mumford, 2014, p. 183). Wallace then seems correct in pointing to the probable importance of the aesthetics in the achievements of athletes. Mumford raises two more important points on the ties between aesthetics and sport. First, aesthetic achievement in sport is often related to problem solving, and by extension, progress. The jump shot of Stephen Curry or the curveball of Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw or the stride of Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt are aesthetically pleasing, in part, because they solve the problem of their respective sports in a way not seen before. Yes, basketball players have sunk shots, and pitchers have thrown curveballs, and sprinters have won races, but not in the same exceptional manner as Curry, Kershaw, and Bolt. Those athletes, and others like them, have innovated in a small, but significant way.⁴ As Mumford says, “if the innovation gains a clear advantage that revolutionizes the way the game is played, then we start to talk in terms of sporting genius” (Mumford, 2014, p. 190). Mumford raises another important point in the discussion of athletic aesthetic achievement.

An aesthetic achievement might also need to be a morally sound one. “In the case of ethics, there is a strong case for the argument that moral vice can detract from aesthetic value in sport and moral virtue can enhance it” (Mumford, 2014, p. 191). Mumford seems to be getting at the idea that an aesthetic athletic achievement is also an achievement through, at the very least, rule-abiding behavior. He uses the former American cycling champion Lance Armstrong as an example of this point: “Armstrong has now admitted to routine drug use to win his titles and the aesthetic value of his races, once enhanced, now seems virtually negated to zero” (Mumford 2014, p. 191). Similar arguments could be constructed for the achievements of other athletes in

different sports, such as Barry Bonds or Marion Jones. Athletic achievement gained through prohibited methods feels somewhat hollow of authenticity in the same way that an artist profiting off of a forgery would. In the cases of the cheating athlete and the copying artist, both employ means which circumvent some of the difficulties involved in great achievement. The test of physical skill imposed by the sport is eased or sidestepped altogether, and the artist is provided the model for artistic achievement and only asked to reproduce with rote accuracy. The cheating athlete and the copying artist do not please us with the products of their skills, but leave us wanting. There does then seem to be, at the very least, possible veracity to the ties between ethics, aesthetics, and sport, and those ties hint at the underlying belief in a *transfer of excellence*. Impressive aesthetic achievements can only be accomplished by ethically sound athletes, the two go together. Wallace though brings up a point that chips away at the popular belief in a *transfer of excellence* between athletic and virtuous skill.

Wallace introduces one final pointed discussion of the celebrated, athletic role model that focuses on a phenomenon all sports fans are familiar with, yet so few have really thought through. “Great athletes usually turn out to be stunningly inarticulate about just those qualities and experiences that constitute their fascination” (Wallace, 2006, p. 152). For people who achieve such great things physically, elite athletes rarely have the ability or desire to fully reflect articulately on those physical feats. For Wallace, this incongruence speaks to something more, something about the constitution of great athletes which has connections to their place as potential role models.

The assumption that Wallace attacks by pointing out the general lack of reflective ability in most athletes, is that the physical intelligence and success athletes demonstrate and achieve in sport is related to their general intelligence and success outside of sport. Intelligence is taken here to mean the ability to solve problems with creative solutions.⁵ To assess the validity of that assumption versus Wallace’s critique of it, understanding the ties between sport and knowledge is

imperative. Does the process of learning, performing, and improving as an athlete in sport translate to any demonstrable progress as a human being in life? Does following the concrete rules of sport enhance the athlete's ability as a person to follow the more abstract "rules of life," such as, how to treat others, how to be a good citizen, how to live a good life? Are great athletes, at the very least, more likely to be great people?

Norwegian sport scholar, Gunnar Breivik (2014), in "Sporting Knowledge" discusses the many possible aspects of a discourse on the connections between the athlete, sport, and knowledge. "Sporting knowledge is...related to practical knowledge, to the discussion of know-how, learning and skill" (Breivik, 2014, p. 195). Central to that discourse is the question of, what kind of thinking, learning, and knowing go on within sport? An answer to that question could facilitate an understanding of whether or not sport offers athletes the potential for growth in more than just a physical way, but also in a holistic way, as people. The assumption being, that if sport requires focused consciousness and reciprocal development of that consciousness, then sport would confer benefits on an athlete in a holistic way that would prepare them for the expectations that come along with being a role model.

Wallace's stance is that the incongruence between an athlete's physical brilliance and verbal lack thereof, points to the unavoidable need for athletes to ratchet down their thinking in order to achieve the physical brilliance that they cannot describe after the fact.

The real, many-veiled answer to the question of just what goes through a great player's mind as he stands at the center of hostile crowd noise and lines up the free-throw that will decide the game might well be: nothing at all. (Wallace, 2006, p. 154)

Wallace argument supports the *dissentive* side of the debate on the athletic role model. Scott Kretchmar (1982) in "Distancing: An Essay on Abstract Thinking in Sports" supports Wallace's stance. Kretchmar argues that the athlete can abstract herself from the concrete

surroundings in order to create new possible kinds of thinking, action, and being. What Kretchmar describes as abstraction brings to mind the thought and work on flow states of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in the way both describe how moving in sporting contexts can open up new places for consciousness to go and new types of thinking to occur.

A flow state can be characterized as an experience during which, “attention can be freely invested to achieve a person’s goals, because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 40). Sport, according to Csikszentmihalyi, certainly provides a means for achieving flow states. “When a normal physical function, like running is performed in a socially designed, goal-directed setting with rules that offer challenges and require skills, it turns into a flow activity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 95). The question then becomes, how does this new kind of flow or abstraction experience of consciousness relate to an athlete’s overall experience of consciousness? Does the thinking and learning in sport necessarily, positively affect, or have any affect at all on the thinking and learning of an athlete outside of sport? Both Kretchmar and Csikszentmihalyi are in agreement that the answer is very likely, no.

For Kretchmar, the thinking involved in sport is of a unique nature, distinct from the kind of thinking that goes on away from athletic competition. This fact means that sport does not necessarily produce useful knowledge that can be applied to the management of personal finances or tending to interpersonal relationships, for example. Kretchmar finds an ally in the rhetoric of Charles Barkley, when the skilled rebounder and scorer points out that, “Hell, I know drug dealers who can dunk” (Barkley, 1992, p. 306). The implication of Barkley’s point being that the demonstration of physical prowess does not guarantee the demonstration of good behavior, even at the very minimum, law-abiding behavior.

Csikszentmihalyi claims that an effect of flow experiences is an increase in the complexity of the self. Processes of differentiation and integration comprise the evolving state of complexity of the self. Differentiation promotes the realization of one’s difference from others,

while integration moves the self towards, “a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 41). The process of integration seems more in line with and complementary to the process of becoming and being a great role model. If sport, and therefore flow experiences, promote the process of integration, then claims of sport building great role models would be supported. Unfortunately, according to Csikszentmihalyi, “the self becomes more differentiated as a result of flow because overcoming a challenge inevitably leaves a person feeling more capable, more skilled” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 41). While Csikszentmihalyi does not extrapolate from his claim, perhaps increasing proficiency at sporting tasks could limit an athlete's ability to connect with others, leaving them at an actual disadvantage in the process of becoming and being a role model. Maybe, athletes start with fewer mental resources needed to be a role model, primarily, that of awareness of others and ability to empathize with others.

Both Kretchmar (1982) and Csikszentmihalyi offer supporting arguments for the *dissentive* side of the debate by calling into serious question the relation between athletic skill and virtue. Wallace, in his critique on that same relation, mentions the place and role of the ancient Greek concept *techne*, defined as, “a thorough, masterful knowledge of a specific field that typically issues in a useful result, can be taught to others, and can be recognized, certified, and rewarded” (Roochnik, 2006, p. 1). In the case of Tracy Austin, Wallace says of her tennis ability, her *techne*, that it was, “the only thing [she] had ever known how to do” (Wallace, 2006, p. 150). If athletic skill, *techne*, is all that an athlete really knows how to do well, and if the development of an athletic skill could hinder the holistic development of a person, it is not too far of a mental leap to say that the moral, ethical, virtuous “skill” of an athlete could be hindered, or at the very least, not positively impacted by a focus on developing athletic skill. David Roochnik comes to that exact conclusion, saying, “The quality of one’s character precedes and is not formed by the possession of a *techne*...learning a given *techne* cannot in and of itself inculcate *arête*” (Roochnik, 2006, p. 91). While we do not have a direct translation of *arête* in English, it can be understood as

encompassing, “the concepts of excellence, goodness, manliness, valor, nobility, and virtue” (Miller, 2004, p. 212). Save manliness, the concept of *arête* seems to include many traits that we would expect from a modern athletic role model. The connections though, between *techne* and *arête*, both historically and today, do not seem to be there.

The thoughts of David Foster Wallace serve as a great initial view into the general ideas about why many people love the elite athlete. By referencing other relevant literature, a better understand whether or not there is any substance to those beliefs can be reached and further arguments for the various sides of the debate of the athletic role model can be gathered. The primary issues raised by Wallace are the influences of cultural affinities for competition and assessing performance, the inspirational quality of athletic achievement, and the debatably developmental nature of sport. In the process of exploring the varied, conflicting theories on the topic of athletic role models, two important questions emerged. The first and often asked question is, “What is the nature of effect that athletes have on people outside of sport?” That question was taken up at the beginning of this chapter. The second question that is asked far less often is, “Does sport provide an environment conducive to developing and readying a person for the expectations that go along with being a role model?” This second question was only taken up seriously by Robert L. Simon (2015). The first question of the effect of athletes on others, in many ways, depends upon the second. The nature of the effect of athletes on people outside of sport relies upon the way in which sport has shaped that athlete through their ascension to the ranks of celebrated professional athletic role model.

According to the evidence presented up until now, sport does not *necessarily* seem appropriate for nurturing an athlete into a role model. The first question of how athletes affect others will be left for the moment in order to better answer the underlying question of whether or not sport can develop the traits in athletes that an athletic role model would be expected to demonstrate.

Developing Athletic Role Models

In this section, research will be introduced in order to better determine whether or not sport provides an activity conducive for making role models out of young athletes. From the research it will be clear that sport in fact, is not inherently good or bad, but can be made so depending on how young athletes interact with and reflect upon it. Just as Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, “for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (Shakespeare, 1843, 2.2). How are we really thinking about sport, and are we thinking about sport in a way that leads young athletes to a path of character development, so that we can depend upon them to be good role models for us all? Or are we thinking about sport in a way that prevents exactly that type of positive development? Discussing those question will not only help us better understand the impact and influence of sport on the debate of the athletic role model, but it will also open up the possibility of making similar inquiries into the way in which we think about the athletic role model.

Paradoxes of Youth and Sport (2002), edited by Margaret Gatz, Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, and Michael Messner, addresses many topics related to kids and athletics, focusing on those issues that present themselves in paradoxical form. For example, “sports programs are touted as a violence prevention tool for urban youth; on the other hand, violence is an integral part of the sports world” (Gatz et al., 2002, p. 1). The first of the book’s four sections addresses the potential ability of sport to help young people develop their character. In “Using Sport to Control Deviance and Violence” Jay Coakley (2002) states that young athletes,

who play sports are less likely than comparable others to engage in deviant or violent behavior only when participation is accompanied by an emphasis on a philosophy of nonviolence, respect for self and others, the importance of fitness and control over self, confidence in physical skills, and a sense of responsibility. (p. 24)

From that quotation, sport in and of itself, is not necessarily a beneficial developmental activity for young athletes. Coakley also adds something that supports the ideas of Kretchmar and Csikszentmihalyi brought up earlier in this chapter.

When sport participation separates young people from the rest of the community and when young athletes see themselves as superior to others who are not part of their athletic fraternity, deviance and violence may be directed at those ‘outsiders’ who are seen as undeserving of their respect. (Coakley, 2002, p. 24)

Coakley even goes so far as to say, “we know that sport participation does not produce...a definitive set of moral lessons leading to special off-the-field sensibilities about good and evil” (Coakley, 2002, p. 24). If that is the case, then the body of sociological knowledge, in an academic sense, currently seems to slightly outpace the equivalent philosophical body of knowledge. In a popular sense though, the sociological understanding that sport does not build moral exemplars is buried under a collective philosophy that sport is an agent of the morally upright. Coakley is not the only one to take that stance in *Paradoxes of Youth and Sport*. Martha Ewing et al. (2002) agrees with Coakley.

Participation in sport alone does not lead to moral attitudes, judgements or behaviors. Participation in physical play and sport can both facilitate and/or undermine the moral development of youth. (Ewing et al., 2002, p. 36)

Ewing et al. also agree that sport must be framed in the appropriate way for it to have a positive effect on participants.

In “Teaching Life Skills through Sport” Steven Danish (2002) says of sport, that it “can provide a valuable vehicle for teaching life skills when these lessons are learned and transferred. However, the process of transferability is not a natural one” (p. 53). Coakley, Ewing et al., and

Danish have all come to the same conclusion, that sport is not inherently good, but must be made so by the people who can frame it for the athletes. The role of parenting then seems important, but perhaps the role coaching even more so. Coaches directly guide the athletes through the sport experience. They have the potential for dramatically impacting the athletic ability of their players, but also the moral ability of their players.

The important role of the coach has received attention in the domain of sport philosophy. Alun Hardman, along with others, have done much work on the motivations of young athletes and the nature of the role of coaches in athletic development and the potential development of future athletic role models. In an article titled “Sports Coaching, Virtue Ethics and Emulation” Hardman et al. (2010) discuss the relation between the modern interpretation of virtue ethics from Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981) and the practice of coaching sport.⁶ Ideally, “coaches should focus greater attention on the ethical implications of their coaching values and actions in particular how such values are recognized, understood and impact upon those they wish to influence” (Hardman, 2010, p. 350). If coaches though are not aware of their effect on the athletes under their tutelage, and if there is more of an emphasis on instrumental activities (skill development with the purpose of winning) then perhaps the ideas, values, and moral education of the athletes will be limited. That idea is supported by the work of Scott Fleming, who along with Alun Hardman and others, looked at the motivations of young male rugby players in choosing athletic role models.

What Fleming et al. (2005) found in “‘Role Models’ Among Elite Young Male Rugby League Players in Britain” was that the driving motivations behind role model selections in their study’s population of young athletes were all of a sport specific, instrumental nature, including technical competence and physical characteristics. Motivations having to do with character were mentioned, but to a far lesser extent. If athletes are convinced of the notion, by coaches and parents primarily, that sport is an activity in which the goal is to win the contest, then the

inclination of athletes to look up to skilled and physically gifted athletes makes sense. The implication though of this trend is that such a view of sport could potentially retard the moral development in young athletes. The end result of the retarded moral development of young athletes might ultimately be the diminished moral status of professional athletes, who were formerly a part of that trend in youth sports, and now find themselves in a professional sport environment where their livelihood (receiving monetary compensation) depends on winning and succeeding, on instrumental skill development and demonstration.

If the role model choices of young athletes are related to their beliefs about sport, and if those beliefs about sport come in large part from how their coaches frame the value of sport, and if the coaching style is based off the coach's personal philosophy of sport, then an agreed upon revision, substitution, or vacation of philosophic principles will have a downstream effect on the views and the development of young athletes. So, if coaches can successfully convince athletes that the value of sport does not lie in the pursuit of winning, but rather in the cultivation of virtues such as hard work, practice, discipline, and cooperation, then perhaps sport could develop young women and men into the types of people that can have a welcomed effect on other athletes and people outside of sport. The only limitation though is that a philosophic change in the way sport is framed to young athletes only addresses one facet of the problem. People outside of sports, young fans especially, are not directly affected by a collective shift in how we think about framing sports for athletes. Something must be done to directly help the fan, especially the wide-eyed, impressionable young fan. Ideally, the athletic role model must be framed in a way that promotes the most benefit for the fan by increasing the chances of having a beneficial role modeling experience and reducing the risk of a disadvantageous one.

The Need for Reframing the Athletic Role Model

If reframing sports to athletes could have positive effects on their understanding of their sport and themselves, then perhaps reframing role models to fans could have beneficial effects on how fans establish their relationships with their personally chosen, celebrated athletes. While the results from the work from Hardman et al. and Fleming et al. on the powerful impact of coaching is fascinating and relevant, this thesis does not seek to provide a better conception of coaching or put forward a hierarchy of values that sport should promote. The goal of this thesis is to better understand the nature, place, and framework of the celebrated athlete as a potential role model. With that in mind, the next chapter will address the idea of the athletic role model in greater philosophic detail. Drawing on the work of the sport philosophers mentioned in this chapter, a more thorough critique of their philosophic accounts will be conducted, with the goal of establishing the strengths and shortcomings of those accounts. Understanding where previous philosophers have succeeded and come up short will provide the opening for a new approach, one that hopefully builds upon previous approaches in a sound, useful way.

Notes:

¹ The Book *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport* (2015) technically lists three authors: Robert L. Simon, Cesar R. Torres, and Peter Hager. Despite having three authors listed, the book and the thoughts within it are primarily attributed to Robert L. Simon. In the body of this thesis, references to *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport* (2015) will be attributed to Simon only, although the bibliographical entry will acknowledge all three authors.

² This quote is taken from the chapter titled “Ritual to Record” in which Guttman (1978) describes seven total characteristics of modern sport including secularism, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucracy, quantification, records. His notion of athletically attained immortality is not one of his characteristics of modern sport, but rather a result of the modern construction of sport.

³ For a detailed description on the effect of the uniquely modern phenomenon of “big data” on sport see Millington & Millington (2015).

⁴ Mumford uses the example of the Fosbury Flop as a prime example of sport innovation. While the nature of say, Stephen Curry’s jump shot, is different from that of the Fosbury Flop, both do represent innovation in some capacity. Fans of basketball, and players, look to Curry’s shot as an

improvement on the standard jump shot, thus offering some way to play basketball “better.” Curry’s jump shot might not have changed the sport of basketball in the same way as the Fosbury Flop changed high jumping, but both have had an impact on their sports in a progressive way. Both have moved the sport forward, or at the very least, opened it up.

⁵ For a more detailed description of intelligence, as it relates to physicality and athleticism, see pp. 110-117 in (Kretchmar, 2005).

⁶ In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) specifically discusses the relation between virtue and his conception of practice, a highly relevant relation when it comes to understanding whether or not sport can build character. A practice for MacIntyre is, “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175). Sport for MacIntyre is most certainly a practice. Because sport is a practice, it promotes specific internal goods. The internal goods which a practice promotes are not things such as fame or fortune, gained from winning. Internal goods are rather things which can only be gained through the intrinsic means of the practice, and are understood only by those who are experienced with the practice itself. For example, an internal good to football, specifically, would be learning how to lead men through the playing of quarterback for a team. To achieve such an internal good through the participation in a practice, specific standard of excellence must be met, and obedience to the rules must be demonstrated. Sport as a practice comes along with the potential of gaining both external and internal goods. MacIntyre, Hardman, and this thesis are concerned primarily with gaining internal goods through sport. External goods, MacIntyre argues, are, “characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 178). Internal goods on the other hand, “are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 178). What is the determinative variable in whether or not internal goods are gained from the participation in a practice? Virtue, which MacIntyre says, “is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 178). To get the valued, internal goods of sport, athletes need to be virtuous in a MacIntyrean sense. This is perhaps another reason why athletes are viewed as role models. Because it is generally accepted that sport has built into it, internal goods, and to obtain those goods according to MacIntyre an athlete must be virtuous, then sport practicing athletes are virtuous people. As is shown by Hardman though, the participation in sport, the attainment of its excellences, and observance of its rules, far from guarantees the gain of internal goods, meaning athletes are not guaranteed to be virtuous.

Chapter 3

Reframing the Debate of the Athletic Role Model

In the previous chapter, the various, prevailing views on the athletic role model were presented and synthesized. The two important questions which arose as a result of the previous chapter's survey were: what is the nature of the effect that athletes have on other people, and does sport provide a developmental arena where athletes can develop into athletic role models? As was established, the philosophic framing of sport has an important impact on how sport does or does not promote character growth and the cultivation of values. Perhaps then, the process of philosophically framing the athletic role model can help us cultivate better role modeling relationships that are more symbiotic rather than parasitic. This chapter will analyze how the three different sides of the debate frame the role modeling relationship. The philosophic inquiries drawn on to support that analyses all provide useful, albeit incomplete looks into the debate and framing of the athletic role model.¹ At the end of this chapter the foundations of a new reframing of the debate on the athletic role model will be presented, building off the strengths and weaknesses of previous accounts.

A Simonian Framing of the Athletic Role Model

Robert L. Simon has contributed a tremendous volume of important thought to the field of sport philosophy, and “in most cases, his influence has been seminal and the focus of ongoing discussion” (Russell, 2015). Simon’s impact on the discourse related to the athletic role model is no exception. One of his strengths as a philosopher is in presenting complicated issues in a clear, lucid fashion that can pave the way for coherent, critical, valuable discussion. In *Fair Play: The*

Ethics of Sport, Simon (2015) lays out the many issues surrounding and exerting an influence on how and why athletes should be role models.

Simon brings attention to those issues by first posing an important question that he and other philosophers must seriously consider if we are to better understand the athletic role model. “Do athletes in general have special responsibilities to be good role models for the rest of us, particularly for the children who look up to them as heroes?” (Simon, 2015, p. 233). This question ultimately brings to light the varied issues tied to the debate of the athletic role model including how the social context of the celebrated athlete affects the role modeling expectations placed on them, if their athletic skill is correlated with skill of the virtuous nature, and how sports might be able to help athletes develop and practice good morals. All of those issues though lead back to the general idea that athletes might have some greater amount of duties, obligations, or expectations on them to behave in a way that can be generally emulated by others.

After touching on the many, intertwined issues important to the debate of the athletic role model, Simon takes his own stance on the issue, resting much of his argument on the reasonableness of believing athletes should be role models. He cites the fact that because there is a concern for excellence in sport, and sport is an activity that is accessible to a wide array of people, then it is reasonable for those people to believe that athletes should also be concerned with excellence. Simon sees, “an intimate connection between participation in athletics and ethics” (Simon, 2015, p. 235). That intimate connection is established by two phenomena, the gaze of the interested spectator and the inner morality of sport.

Simon’s inner morality is directly connected to his broad internalist approach to understanding sport:

Internalism...holds that sport is itself a significant source of or basis for ethical principles and values, can have a significant degree of autonomy from the wider society, and can support, stand for, and express sets of values of its own. (Simon, 2015, p. 28)

An internalist approach to understanding sport sees it as markedly distinct, internally different from the world external to it. Specifically, Simon believes that, “sport has a kind of internal ethic, what might be called, an internal morality of sport, that is tightly (some would say conceptually) connected with the idea of athletic competition” (Simon, 2007a, p. 36). The prevailing understanding of athletic competition that Simon references is that of, “a mutual quest for excellence,” in which,

competitors are obliged to do their best so as to bring out the best in their opponents.

Competitors are to present challenges to one another within the constitutive rules of the sport being played. Such an account may avoid the charges, often directed against competitive sports, that they are zero-sum games which encourage the selfish and egotistical desire to promote oneself by imposing losses on others. (Simon, 2007b, p. 250)

Simon’s inner morality of sport, as experienced through the “mutual quest for excellence” offers two rationales for calling athletes role models, both of which again bring to mind the idea of a *transfer of excellence* between athletic and virtuous skill. First, to achieve excellence in sport not only requires adherence to the rules, but also the practice of virtues directly related to the ways in which sport, and the attainment of excellence, is a mutual endeavor. The branch of philosophy concerned with virtues, ethics, is after all, primarily concerned with the effects of human behavior on others. Second, if the practice of virtues is minimally required in the pursuit and achievement of excellence, then athletes who achieve higher degrees of excellence might be more virtuous than other athletes. For Simon, sport

provides a unique moral environment in which athletes can develop and practice virtues befitting an athletic role model.

Simon's point about the inner morality of sport was also addressed in chapter two of this thesis, and it sounds quite similar to a MacIntyrean conception of sport as a practice.² Simon is right to argue that when sport is properly framed and practiced with an attention to the cultivation and practice of values such as discipline, teamwork, and leadership, it will be conducive to developing athletes into role models. Although, others have argued that the internal moral quality of sport is in fact, not that different from the external moral quality of the world (Russell, 2007). That is not to say that sports only reflects the worst values of society in general, but rather that all of the diverse values of society can appear and resonate within sport depending on specific factors (Russell, 2015). Regardless, sport today is not practiced in the ideal way Simon believes it should. Far too often there is an over emphasis on competitive success and specialization. The deleterious quality of over emphasis comes from the people poorly framing the sports for the athletes, namely parents and coaches (Rosenwald, 2015).

The "inner morality of sport" argument to support claiming athletes should be role models is theoretically reasonable, but it is realistically unreasonable due to the current way in which sport is being practiced and philosophically framed. That leaves the interested gaze of the spectator as the remaining source of argumentation for believing athletes should be role models. While Simon offers some initial arguments for why it is reasonable for the spectator to believe athletes should be role models, Christopher Wellman takes a more expansive, entertaining approach in making the same argument.

Spectator Established Moral Exemplarism

Christopher Wellman (2003) makes an argument in strong support of the idea that athletes are role models. His argument, as discussed in chapter two, represented the views of the majority, that athletes are and should be role models. Because this view is so deeply ingrained into the collective psyche of sport fans and admirers, it demands an extensive critique. What follows is a nuanced analysis of Wellman's position, and similar positions that stem from the social visibility of the celebrated athlete.

In Wellman's work, he orchestrates a hypothetical dialogue between two very real, former athletes. Charles Barkley argues against qualifying athletes as role models. Karl Malone advocates for athletes to accept their culturally appointed position as role models. Wellman, primarily through the voice of Karl Malone, argues that while athletes are not necessarily better suited than parents, for example, their position as celebrated sports figures in the eyes of the public gives them greater influence as potential role models, and therefore a special responsibilities to act well.³

Malone: Like it or not, we are role models. Because of our prominent and exalted standing, we cannot choose whether or not to be role models... There is nothing intrinsic to athletics which requires its participants to be role models; were it not for the attention we happen to attract, we would have no special responsibilities. (Wellman, 2003, pp. 332 & 335)

The "special responsibilities" of an athlete in turn, Wellman argues, bring with them "additional moral reasons" for athletes to behave morally. Wellman's argument in favor of the idea of the athletic role model is founded on the "additional moral reasons" he believes athletes have to behave appropriately. What is the nature of the "additional moral reasons" Wellman brings up? Is the greater amount of moral reasons due to the accumulation of one type of reason or an abundance of varied reasons? Also is an abundance of moral reasons in fact unnecessary in

compelling moral action and therefore, ultimately, inconsequential in the decision making process about whether or not to act morally? Because Wellman believes that the accumulation of additional moral reasons begins with the social position of the athlete (the higher the social position, the more “eyes” on the athlete, the addition of moral reasons), it is reasonable to assume that the additional moral reasons he brings up are of the same nature. Those reasons seem to be the numerous interested gazes of sport spectators. It is undeniable that athletes have many people watching them in one way or another. On this point, Wellman is most certainly correct.

The question then becomes, does someone who is seen by many have a greater obligation to act in a way that appeases the expectations of their onlookers? Attention to the formation of the previous question is important. Notice, the word “obligation” is used, because it is not clear what motivation the athlete herself has for acting a certain way, based off the construct that Wellman is putting forward. If the source of the extra moral reasons is the great amount of attention on athletes from spectators, then it is the attention that holds the power in affecting and modulating the behavior of the athlete, and therefore the behavior of the athlete must satisfy the spectator in order to be considered acceptable. There are potential problems and inadequacies with this idea of Wellman.

First, there is a debatable assumption in the construction of Wellman’s argument of additional moral reasons. The assumption is that not only will the behavior of athletes be seen by many people, but that an athlete’s behavior will directly affect the people who see it. Beyond that, Wellman seems to believe that the consensus on if an athlete’s behavior is acceptable, is based on whether or not spectators collectively believe they have been positively or negatively affected by the behavior themselves. For example, a frequently cited relation between athlete behavior and spectator response concerns the use of performance enhancing substances.⁴

Second, and more importantly, the visibility of a certain behavior does not necessarily change the ultimate nature of the behavior as good or bad. While the following example might

seem morbid, it demonstrates an important point. Suppose a troubled football player is standing in his home stadium. In his hand he holds a gun, and about ten feet away from him stands a stranger, perhaps someone he would encounter in the social realm out on the town. Suppose as well, that the two people in the process conversing inside of the completely empty football stadium experience some friction, an argument ensues, and both people end up quite angry at the other. The football player, due to his anger directed towards this stranger, fires the gun at the innocent man, killing him. The act of murder is a bad thing as defined not only by law, but by general social consensus. Now, imagine the same scenario, but with the stadium filled to capacity, holding tens of thousands of people. Does the visibility of the murder change the fact that the murder is wrong? No, murder is murder. Is this an extreme example? Yes, but it shows that the spectator's gaze does not and should not hold the ultimate definitive power in what behaviors are good or bad.

Another issue with the assumption of cause and effect is the validity of such a relationship. For example, there is a lack of conclusive evidence that proves a positive correlation between the adult, professional athlete's use of performance enhancing drugs and adolescent use of similar substances (Petersen, 2010). Despite a dearth of objectively definitive data, many philosophers, along with sport fans on the *affirmative* side of the debate, would maintain their stance that athletes send messages through their behavior to fans, especially young fans. Let us explore this idea of athletes sending messages to their fans through their behavior, first using the example of domestic abuse, a problem that professional sporting leagues have been dealing with recently, especially the National Football League (NFL). Supporters of the idea that athletes are role models might argue that when a professional football player such as Dallas Cowboys defensive lineman Greg Hardy, or the countless other NFL players implicated in domestic abuse, choose to harm their loved ones that the spectators who see that behavior might be instilled with the belief that hurting someone is to some degree acceptable. The argument sounds flimsy at best.

It is doubtful that the moral compass of fans would be completely recalibrated by observing the behavior of professional football players or other high-profile athletes, to the point that harming an innocent person becomes an acceptable behavior. If those adult and adolescent fans do ultimately harm someone in a similar fashion, it would be difficult to attribute that action to their observation of professional athletes doing the same thing. An ordinary man of any age charged with beating his wife is unlikely to say in the interrogation room of a police station, "I saw a pro football player punch his wife, so I thought it would be okay if I punched mine." That example is not meant to be crude, but we cannot be intimidated by these issues and this kind of discourse if we hope to move towards consensus on the debate of the athletic role model.

What is to be done about athletes sending much subtler messages on the field, in the context of their own sport? Sticking with the Dallas Cowboys, what is to be done when wide receiver Dez Bryant begins screaming and yelling at his teammates on the sideline, presumably because of their inadequate performance? What message is Dez Bryant sending to fans everywhere when he publically tears into his own teammates for their perceived failures? Has the myopic pursuit of victory clouded Bryant's judgment and sent the message to everyone that what really matters in life is winning, not respect, forgiveness, or understanding?

The issue with answering such questions is figuring out which fans and spectators get to decide on the nature of the messages that Bryant and other athletes like him are allegedly sending through their behavior in sport? In the case of Bryant and his sideline tirades, there were mixed reactions. Some viewed his actions as those of a petulant, poor sport. "What Dez Bryant really needs is to be told in no uncertain terms that he has to get control of himself" (Doyel, 2013). Others lauded his actions as those of a consummate competitor, a gridiron gladiator, and inspiring leader. Jason Witten, after one of Bryant's sideline tirades, said of the wide receiver, "The guy loves to play, loves to win. There are no hard feelings. He's a great receiver and plays his tail off week-in and week-out" (Chase, 2013). So which is it? Does Dez Bryant need to control himself

and reel in his tempestuous passion, or does he need keep playing and displaying that exact volatile passion in dominating displays of physical prowess? It is unclear as to what the answer is and whose answer to trust, again showing that the argument that athletes send clear, discernable, value-laden messages is void of any convincing substance.

These arguments hold true not just for adult and adolescent fans, but young fans and kids as well. People worried about how athletes affect kids, often point to the impressionability of young fans. It is true that kids are less set in their behavior but this does not mean that their mutable behavior will be directly negatively affected by observing athletes behave poorly. Consider a young cowboys fan named Tom watches Dez Bryant throw a tantrum one Sunday afternoon, similar to the one previously described. The next day, when Tom goes to school he decides to play capture the flag with his classmates during recess. Unfortunately Tom's team loses. When Tom's team loses he throws a Bryant-like tantrum, yelling at his teammates, and saying things such as, "You stink at capture the flag!" The teacher who is supervising the kids notices Tom's derisive yelling and asks to talk to him alone to find out why he's so upset.

The teacher finds out that Tom is upset at losing the game of capture the flag, but cannot understand why the Tom is irate to such a great degree? When asked about his reaction, Tom tells his teacher, "I saw Dez Bryant get mad at his teammates, so I thought it was okay if I got mad at mine." While the teacher can react in many different ways, it is highly unlikely the teacher will seek to reprimand Dez Bryant, the athlete. What is more likely is that the teacher would do one of two things. The teacher might reach out to Tom's guardians, hoping that his guardians will help the young fan better understand his own relationship with professional athletes. Or the teacher could take it upon herself to do the same thing. A well-known rhetorical question often posed to a child in this kind of situation demonstrates the likely response quite well.

Kids often attribute their poor behavior to the example and influence of others, but rarely do caretakers accept those attributions. Attempts by kids to excuse their own poor behavior often

come in the form of the claim, “He” or “She did it too!” When met with this excuse, parents, teachers, and caretakers often respond with the rhetorical question, “If they jumped off of a bridge, would you do it too?” The question points to the lesson that kids are taught and learn at a very early age, that another person’s poor behavior is not permission to behave the same way. Claiming that an athlete’s behavior is going to harm young fans, ignores the important lesson that kids learn early on in their lives, that you are responsible for your own actions. Perhaps, the cause and effect relationship between an athlete and fan is actually much less explicit.

A rebuttal to the examples of clear harm (e.g. Greg Hardy) and subtle harm (e.g. Dez Bryant) might point to a subconscious, implicit relation between athlete and spectator behavior. The rebuttal could be constructed as such: A spectator does not consciously conclude that what an athlete does is acceptable, but rather there is an implicit acceptance of such harm infliction or extreme behavior, giving subconscious or tacit permission to others to do the same. In that case a fan might be influenced by an athlete’s behavior in such a way that the fan emulates the behavior or understands it as acceptable without any awareness of the emulation or acceptance.

In regards to the subconscious or tacit cause and effect relationship of athlete and spectator behavior, it is perhaps not the athlete who should solely be held accountable. The sporting bureaucracy that reinstates an athlete or withholds punishment after an athlete behaves poorly also deserves to be held accountable. An athlete who behaves poorly should not be let off the ethical hook, but the implicit message of acceptance which theoretically might result in a spectator’s poor behavior, might be due more to the conduct of the sporting bureaucracy than the conduct of the athlete. The legal system punishes the athlete while the sporting bureaucracy forgives him. Returning to the recent domestic abuse case of Greg Hardy demonstrates this paradox quite well.

The NFL reinstated Greg Hardy after he served a four game suspension for allegedly harming his ex-girlfriend, Nicole Holder (Bergman, 2015). Upon his reinstatement, NFL

commentator Terry Bradshaw used his visible position to voice his dismay on the decision of the NFL and the Dallas Cowboys to allow Hardy, and other players implicated in similar incidents, to play again in the NFL.

Dallas Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones, in his desperation to get a pass rusher said, 'Well, you know what America, my Cowboy fans, he's alright, he's a good boy, we're going to get him all straightened out over here.' And bring him in there, which he did. [Hardy] has his the first news conference, he makes a fool of himself, and then Jerry goes out and...basically becomes an enabler himself. This is wrong. (Bradshaw, 2015)

The Cowboys also took a controversial stance on the poor behavior of Dez Bryant. During a pre-season, training camp practice, Dez Bryant got into a physical altercation with one of his own teammates. Instead of chastising Bryant for his lack of self-control and willingness to engage in extra-athletic physical fights with fellow players, the Cowboys promoted the incident by posting it online as a "MUST WATCH" video clip ("Cowboys Promote Fight," 2015). The Dallas Cowboys seemingly had multiple opportunities to reinforce virtuous conceptions of the athletic role model through addressing poor behavior from athletes in their organization, but instead the Cowboys chose to further their own bureaucratic, capitalistic cause. While the Dallas Cowboys only represent one team in a diverse landscape of competitive athletic organizations in the United States, they have historically been anointed "America's Team," making them a prime example to analyze in this investigation.

The questionable ethics of a sporting bureaucracy brings up the point and argument made in the first chapter of this thesis, pertaining to the rhetoric of the athletic role model. Perhaps, sporting organizations take minimally critical actions needed to preserve the idea of and the possibility of calling athletes role models, while not hurting the bottom line and the commercial interests of their own organization. A sport bureaucracy, for example, suspends a player, thereby

sending the message that the behavior is not tolerated, but only to a limited extent, one that would not affect that player's ability to return quickly to competition and impact the game. The athlete can return to the field after taking the meager punishment, to contribute to the team and the spectacle of professional sports, generating much desired fan turnout and revenue for the owners of the franchise.

While it is true that there are more eyes on the behavior of professional athletes, it is unclear as to whether or not the collective gaze of the spectator should have a determinative power on the role model status of the athlete. Wellman's additional moral reasons are not moral reasons in their underlying nature. The awareness of an athlete's behavior by a spectator is not necessarily a moral phenomenon. While a component of morality can be the effect of behavior on others, Wellman does not empirically or philosophically do enough to convince his audience that athletes are modeling behaviors that are causing direct emulation and objectively similar, unwanted harm. The argument for athletes as moral exemplars, at least according to Wellman, is inadequate to justify the idea that athletes have special responsibilities and should be exemplary role models. The strength of his approach is that it takes seriously the visibility of athletes, which was previously isolated as an important nuance to this dilemma. Although, we will see, his treatment of the issue of visibility is limited, an expansion of which by Earl Spurgin will ultimately provide a novel insight.

Role Modeling Qua Athlete

Randolph Feezell (2005) takes the *tentative* side in the debate of the athletic role model. In doing so, he responds to, expounds upon, and deviates from Wellman's assessment. Initially, Feezell provides much-needed nuance to the debate by distinguishing between descriptive role models and normative role models. Broad, normative role modeling is connected to the asking

and answering of questions such as, “How should I live? What kind of person should I be?” (Feezell, 2005, p. 21). Wellman’s moral exemplarism is a brand of normative role modeling. The narrow, descriptive role model provides a model of specific behavior within sport that can be imitated, for example, how to play a certain position on a team. “In the narrow sense, to ‘Be Like Mike’ is to play basketball like Michael Jordan” (Feezell, 2005, p. 21). Descriptive role models show other athletes and non-athletes how to excel in sports.

Feezell chooses to endorse a primarily descriptive definition of the athletic role model. He accomplishes this by calling athletes “lusory objects whose meaning and significance are internal to the world of the sport in which they excel” (Feezell, 2005, p. 32). In referencing Huizinga’s work in *Homo Ludens* (1955) Feezell sees sport and play as activities distinct from those of real life. The schism between the world of sport and the world of reality was also touched upon by Simon (2007a & 2015). Whereas Simon found a unique moral quality to the world of sport, and a transfer of that morality to life outside of sport, Feezell does not find the same moral quality and chooses to contain the meanings in sport to sport itself.

Games are played out within their own self-imposed constraints, trivial activities, when compared to the values and demands of everyday life. Shooting and kicking and hitting balls have meaning only within the context of a play world. Special meanings and values arise internal to this world. Spatial and temporal limitations and the intrinsic ends defined by the rules and conventions of this alternative world constitute a distinctively ordered experience, but the internal purposes of the play world are relatively pointless in relation to “real” life. (Feezell, 2005, p. 29)

Feezell uses the distinction between the world of sport and the real world to limit the athlete’s influence to other athletes, keeping the idea of the athletic role model internal to sport.

An athlete through their play shows other athletes how to play well or poorly, but Feezell does not attach any moral, virtuous significance to that performance.

Feezell's account has the advantage of freeing the athlete from any implicit moral demands on their behavior. Athletes as lusory objects have only to worry about modeling behavior for other athletes, "who seek to perform at the highest levels and for fans who appreciate the ideal of athletic excellence" (Feezell, 2005, p. 31). Feezell is right to claim that his conception of athletes as lusory objects solves some issues in the debate of the athletic role model confronted thus far. First, it solves the problem that "we simply do not know enough about our sports heroes in order to believe that they are moral exemplars" (Feezell, 2005, p. 32). Second, it beneficially limits the extent and ways in which we believe athletes *ought* to behave. As lusory objects, athletes are only expected to model behavior within sport that is virtuous, such as practicing sportsmanship. Feezell's desire to limit the scope of expectations placed on athletes is an important one, but there are implications of such a limited view that must be addressed.

The drawback of Feezell's account is that it dualistically divides up the athletes into the person playing the sport and the person not playing the sport. While Feezell is not necessarily incorrect in his account, it seems to implicitly discourage an athlete from choosing to practice a more holistic conception of role modeling. A holistic view of athletic role modeling is likely preferable because it can, for example, help us better understand, "how humanity is tied to physicality" (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 103). Such a holistic conception of role modeling would likely extend into an athlete's life outside of sport, but in a reasonable way. While expecting an athlete to always behave in a certain way simply because of their social status (Wellman's moral exemplarism) seems slightly unreasonable, appreciating if an athlete behaves well within and outside of sport does not seem like an unreasonable state of affairs.

Feezell does valuable work in expanding and advancing the debate past the initial account of Wellman. The strength of Feezell's account lies in his tempering of role modeling

expectations placed on athletes. The drawback of his account lies in his theoretical division of the athlete and ultimately leaving the possibility of athletes choosing to become moral exemplars unexplored. The work of Earl Spurgin, though, and his attention to the athlete's autonomy, provides a compelling theoretical bridge between the disjointed accounts of Feezell and Wellman.

Concerns with Privacy and Choice

Earl Spurgin (2012) takes a different approach to the debate of the athletic role model than that of Wellman and Feezell. Wellman leaned upon the social status of the athlete in constructing an argument in full support of athlete as role model and moral exemplar. Feezell narrowly focused on the athlete's role within the context of sport as lusory objects in order to counter the broad expectations that come along with being a moral exemplar. What is common to the arguments of Wellman and Feezell is the absence of accounting for the athlete's autonomy and choice. In contrast, Spurgin believes an athlete's autonomy is an essential issue in the understanding the athletic role model, and his arguments fall on the *tentative* side of the debate. He addresses the issue of autonomy through the modern phenomenon of social technologies such as television and the internet, along with privacy concerns related to those technologies.

Issues of privacy connect the advent of modern technologies with the debate of athletic role models. Spurgin describes the value of privacy as something that "is necessary for us to live well...provides a sphere of life in which we can behave in various ways," and "try out new ideas, thoughts, and views" (Spurgin, 2012, p. 120). Excessively broad role model obligations, such as those in Wellman's account, encroach on that valuable privacy, especially considering the invasive quality of modern social technologies, which can capture and rapidly share seemingly private behavior. The result of the modern encroachment on privacy due to social technologies, as Spurgin states, is that "one's ability to determine one's own conception of the good life, and

conduct one's affairs according to that conception, is hampered" (Spurgin, 2012, p. 120). His point gets at the idea that a good role model most likely wants to be a role model. Ideally, we should want athletic role models who firmly believe that role modeling is part of their good life. So, by raising the issue of the good life, Spurgin introduces an important point of tension into the debate over the athletic role model. How do we reasonably balance role model expectations with granting the freedom for athletes to explore what their good life is, and whether or not that good life includes in it the desire to be a role model?

The same social technologies that can encroach on an athlete's good life also provide a means for athletes to establish appropriate boundaries. Spurgin builds off of Feezell's conception of descriptive role modeling and incorporates into it an important modification based off of the need to account for an athlete's autonomy. Spurgin calls his new view, modified particularism. To be a role model in Spurgin's modified particularism, "one adopts role-model status either by taking on roles that make one a role model or by holding oneself out to be a role model" (Spurgin, 2012, p. 121). For Spurgin roles which confer role model status include, "parent, professor, judge, police officer, priest, or doctor," because there are generally understood codes of conduct that come along with those roles (Spurgin, 2012, p.121). While an athlete is not necessarily a role model, an athlete can become one, if an athlete chooses to hold themselves out as such. This is where social technologies come into play for Spurgin.

If an athlete chooses to display themselves to others as someone whose behavior is worthy of emulation, then that athlete can reasonably be viewed as a role model. Examples of such autonomous displays include that of Barkley when in 1993 he chose not to be a role model, and when tennis star Novak Djokovic recently chose to accept the responsibilities that come along with being a role model and describing them as, "a great privilege and great opportunity to do something, and create a change that will be positive" (Bishara & Davies, 2016). If an athlete chooses to hold themselves out as a role model then they can reasonably be held accountable if

they fail to satisfy the expectations that come along with such a choice. Spurgin believes his account of modified particularism will help us “see others as role models only when they have earned it, and see those people as role models regarding only those aspects of life about which they have earned it” (Spurgin, 2012, p. 130).

The strength of Spurgin’s account lies in his consideration of the autonomy of the potential athletic role model. Everyone should all have access to that ability, regardless of their social visibility. The preservation of choice allows for athletes to experience freedom and exercise their autonomy in approaching important potential role model obligations. A likely outcome of modified particularism would be more effective role models as well, considering that someone who wants to be a role model will do better with the associated obligations than someone who does not want to be a role model. Modified particularism proves a promising alternative to the propositions of Wellman and Feezell.

Where Spurgin’s account loses force is in the connection to media technologies and privacy concerns. Spurgin makes the point that it is mainly through the medium of modern technologies such as social media outlets that athletes choose to become role models. The reliance on technology and how athletes virtually modify their privacy and visibility of their personal lives is a somewhat risky one. Should technologies change extensively, Spurgin’s account of modified particularism would likely need revision. What is needed is an account of the athletic role model that can best withstand inevitable future changes in such things as technology. While Spurgin, similar to Feezell, moves the debate forward, the conclusion he provides is not fully satisfactory

An Existential Shift in Approach

The new philosophical approach called for in this chapter must be founded on the shift from rigid, dichotomous, dualistic conceptions of the athletic role model mentioned in chapter two and the prior sections of this chapter, to a conception of the athletic role model that is less definitionally fixed, yet not immune from judgment and interpretation. The shift in approach should protect the space in which athletes have the ability to explore what their good life is, as Spurgin brings up in his argument. Related to this is the need to free athletes from both Wellman's somewhat burdensome idea of moral exemplarism and Feezell's limited concept of the athlete as lusory object. Spurgin's thesis provides an inspiring departure and theoretical gateway into the new approach to be elucidated further in the next chapter.

Spurgin's works shows the need for a more passionate philosophic advocacy for the preservation of an athlete's autonomy in the discourse on the athletic role model. Since Spurgin's account depends upon the changing landscape of technology, the preservation of autonomy will instead be imbedded into the foundational bedrock of the new approach proposed in this thesis. In many ways the emphasis on autonomy in this thesis mirrors the emphasis on freedom in the existential tradition of philosophy in which, "human beings are not predefined as essence but defined by their actions" (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 144).

The existential tradition of philosophy is concerned primarily with the relation between subjective experience and human existence. Existentialism, in other words, offers an account of human existence in which, "we find our own way of being in the world and give meaning to our life" (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 144). The novel approach to understanding the athletic role model as presented in this thesis is very much focused on allowing athletes to find their own way to role model instead of being given ways to role model by others. In the next chapter, four different ways in which athletes can choose to role model will be introduced. The idea of finding our own

way, and athletes finding theirs, involves the important underlying ideas of time, and especially, autonomy.

The importance of time cannot be underestimated in the process of becoming a role model. This thesis has hopefully disproved any notion that athletes are role models simply because they are athletes, a notion that does not fully address the necessity of time's passage in understanding the athletic role model. To become a role model, an athlete must demonstrate certain behavior over time. We are always appreciating and reflecting on an athlete's mutable role modeling status. No matter how much we would like to, we can never predict the ways in which an athlete will role model. So, if being a role model is part of the meaning of our lives, and if the meaning of our lives comes from the process of living, and if that process depends on the passage of time, then the meaning of being a role model comes from the passage of time, and not before it. The idea that meaning comes from the passage of time and not before it reflects the existential idea of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2007).

This thesis has argued for a conception of the athletic role model that is inextricably tied to the passage of time but can never come before time, and never predict the ways in which athletes will behave. As will be argued for in chapter four, the categories of athletic role modeling presented in this thesis are fluid in the way that athletes can fit into and move between different categories depending on how they behave over time. How athletes behave over time is directly connected to the second important conclusion of this thesis, that of the need to preserve autonomy in the discussions of the athletic role model.

As was extensively discussed in chapter three, much of the previous thought on the athletic role model did not adequately account for the autonomy of athletes. The approach presented in this thesis and the philosophic tradition of existentialism both, by definition, preserve autonomy in the way they both focus on freedom as a foundational condition of human life. From

the existentialist point of view, the interaction between our freedom and our subjectivity produces what we have all come to understand as human life.

This reveals the basic understanding of human freedom in existential philosophy: it is not a matter of being able to do anything; it is a synthesis of possibility and necessity where both are of equal importance; it is a matter of being free to commit and choose our own terms of engagement in our situation. (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 144)

Athletes must be free to choose their “terms of engagement” in their situation, and it has to be acceptable if they do not chose to be role models in a exemplary way like Jackie Robinson, Dan Gable, or Novak Djokovic. It has to be okay if an athlete exercises their autonomy in choosing to be the kind of role model that defies social convention and opts for a life of extraordinarily unique personal expression like Dennis Rodman, who will be mentioned in the following chapter. Not adequately accounting for autonomy would likely result in not only disgruntled athletes but poor athletic role models as well.

As will be mentioned in chapter four, the best role models will likely be those who wish to be examples for others. Preserving autonomy then is not only about respecting the athlete, it is also about helping the fan. If a fan exercises their own freedom and autonomy by choosing to select an athlete as a role model, those fans then should be armed with the conceptual ingredients and reflective recipe to select the best role model for themselves. Fans should not be subjected to conventionally constructed understandings of the athletic role model, but should rather exercise their freedom, autonomy, and subjectivity in constructing personally determined understandings of their own athletic role models. As those constructions get underway, based on the analysis of previous philosophic approaches, this new approach also encourages those fans to rest in tentative conclusions and to avoid the earthly deification of any athletic role model.

Ultimately this new approach should leave fans better off, more prepared to mentally metabolize the complex world around them, to discern what athletes are perhaps worthy of emulation, and better apt to cope with the inevitable mistakes they themselves and celebrated athletes will make in the face of all the various tests life offers. We all will autonomously make choices, some will lead us to success, others to failure. Athletes must be given the freedom to do the same thing, their autonomy must be preserved, and this new approach seeks to do just that.

Existential philosophy helps tremendously in justifying the new conceptual approach presented in this thesis. Through novel philosophic argumentation and reference to philosophic tradition it is clear that the conclusions of this thesis are not coming out of the theoretical blue. This thesis began from a personal human experience and will not lose touch with general human experience. Referencing existentialism bears that out. Existentialism is first and foremost a human philosophy, and the new approach presented in this thesis is the same, a human approach. It allows for individual freedom, social recognition, praise for success, and consequences for failure.

In both the existential account and in this thesis autonomous human action is protected and emphasized as a means to better understand human existence. Athletes are people too, making the emphasis on autonomous action just as relevant to understanding athletic existence as it is to understanding human existence in general. There is no division between the athlete and the person. In this way, the new approach presented in this thesis is a holistic one. Again, holism as a theory can help us better understand and “describe how humanity is tied to physicality” (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 103). The athlete’s humanity as a person is in no way distinct from their physical abilities and achievements in sport. In the end, we are not compartmentalized beings, we are meaning seeking beings, and our actions reflect our values, not our obligations. Kretchmar stresses how the pursuit of meaning influences our lives:

First, meaning seems to be a doorway through which virtually all human behavior must pass...Second, a meaningful life includes and fosters excellence...Finally, meaning is a democratic value in contrast to excellence. Not all of us can achieve something that is truly excellent...We do not have to be extremely gifted or put our lives out balance to experience meaning, but we do have to be dedicated to those things that make up our own narrative.

(Kretchmar, 2005, pp. 228-229)

Good things happen when we motivate our own actions through the pursuit of meaning, of personally determined value. Being a role model is part of such a pursuit, and to place excessive obligation, or limitations on an athlete in a way that restricts their autonomy in the pursuit of meaning would be a mistake. A holistic, existentially aligned understanding of the role model would avoid the pitfalls of previously proposed understandings, providing the athlete full reign over their narrative.

Drawing on the relevant and useful points of the aforementioned philosophic arguments, along with considering the consistently unpredictable nature of human behavior and the often destructively tempting nature of the modern world, a new philosophical approach to understanding the athletic role model is called for. The new approach to understanding the athletic role model, as proposed in the following chapter, relies upon the value of observing and judging actions, not enforcing impersonal, esoteric essences.

Notes:

¹ The accounts of Tamburrini (2000) and Tännsjö (2000) will be omitted from this section, as analyses of the other four accounts will result conclusions that would resemble those derived from analyses of Tamburrini and Tännsjö.

² A more detailed description of Alasdair MacIntyre's views of sport as a practice in *After Virtue* can be found in note 5 in chapter 2 of this thesis.

³ The issue of responsibility is one that has been taken up repeatedly by philosophers, most specifically, Hans Jonas (1984) in *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The responsibilities that

Jonas brings up have to do with the development of technologies that can dramatically impact the condition of human life, for example, the harnessing of nuclear energy. As Jonas says, because of those technologies, people with power over those technologies are forced to, “consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence, of the race” (Jonas, 1984, p. 8). For Jonas, there is a novel quality of responsibility that comes along with the acquisition and wielding of such tremendous power. The special responsibilities of athletes that Wellman brings up are similar to those Jonas brings up, only in the way that both address people in positions of power who can possibly affect others. While the responsibilities of athletes are far more minimal and probably do not affect the future existence of man, responsibilities for athletes are nonetheless present. Jonas believes that the unique modern world demands a rethinking of ethics. While there have been athletes in society for so much of human history, perhaps the unique modern world also demands a rethinking of how we ethically understand athletes. The presence of responsibilities, if they are constructed based off history and convention, should not be accepted at face value. If those responsibilities are derived from the past, then those conventions must be critiqued as to again avoid the naturalistic fallacy, or the false assumption that the way things are is also the way things should be. A full critique of those conventions is carried out in chapter three.

⁴ While the use of Performance-Enhancing Substances (PES) is often invoked in discussions about how athletes role model, often times important nuances to related issues are left unaccounted for. It is not a conclusively bad thing to do. Debates are ongoing as to whether or not the taking of PES is an unacceptable behavior (Brown, 1980; Burke, 1997; Schneider & Butcher, 1993; Simon, 2007b; Tamburrini, 2000). The two most important points that are continually raised in the debate over PES, are the weighing of an athlete’s autonomy, and the actual nature of the effect that athletes have on other people, especially younger athletes. What seems to get lost in the argument is the fact that both athletes and fans have autonomy, something directly accounted for in this thesis. Athletes do not bend to the fan’s every wish, and fans do not directly copy what athletes do. Athletes are not robots and fans are not parrots. The sooner athletes are granted their autonomy and fans realize their own autonomy, arguments as to cause and effect will be rendered irrelevant. Also, a new, somewhat related debate has emerged on the acceptability of use of certain recreational substances. Marijuana, for example, is being legalized by certain states, raising the question, should an athlete in Colorado (a state with legalized marijuana) who tests positive for marijuana (THC) be reprimanded for his behavior, given the fact that it is very likely his consumption of the recreation drug was completely legal (Hochman & Saunders, 2013)? While the behavior of drug taking is not the only behavioral dynamic brought up in the debate on the athletic role model, it is an often raised issue, making it relevant in this discussion. Ultimately, none of the approaches used in resolving the debate over performance-enhancing and recreational drugs can be directly applied in this investigation, as a means to resolve the issue of the athletic role model. In fact, some of the conclusions in this thesis could be applied to the specific debate of PES use by athletes.

Chapter 4

The Many Flavors of Athletic Role Modeling

I call an *amateur* in philosophy anyone who accepts the terms of a usual problem as they are...doing philosophy authentically would consist in *creating* the framework of the problem and of *creating* the solution. - Henry Bergson

(Citation in Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 14)

Having established the need for a new approach to the athletic role model, this chapter will present that new approach. In chapter three, the prominent, prior philosophic approaches were summarized and critiqued for their strengths and weaknesses. From that critique, it became clear that a new approach to understanding the athletic role model must satisfy a few requirements. First, it must not put unreasonable burdens or limitations on an athlete's life. Whether expectations are unreasonable depends on the second requirement that an athlete's autonomy must be preserved. An athlete must be given the opportunity, the chance to choose if they want to become a role model, and what kind of role model they would like to be. Satisfying those requirements demands not only a new theoretical construction but a philosophical shift in how we go about beginning a discussion of athletic role models. The new approach presented in this chapter must begin from a new philosophic place.

Netflix Binges and Scholarly Breakthroughs

Applying the new philosophic approach will require both a certain mentality of observation and of judgement. Understanding the athletic role model will demand a new process, heavily mental, generally consisting of two phases, and those phases must be completed in the correct sequence. The objective of the first phase, observation, is to gather the necessary facts and survey relevant conditions that will prove pertinent in completing the second judgement. In the second phase, an athlete can be placed into certain appropriate categories based on the knowledge gathered in the first phase. Notice that the second phase of judgement does not result in a “yes” or “no” answer. As was shown in chapter three, approaching the debate over the athletic role model with the end product of reaching a dichotomous answer does not fully address the great many issues that arise in pursuit of understanding the athletic role model. The categories of role modeling will be fleshed out later on in this chapter. A recent pop culture phenomenon helped to clarify the need for such categories

In late 2015, Netflix aired a compelling documentary television series (docuseries) titled “Making a Murderer” (Ricciardi & Demos, 2015). The show detailed the trials and tribulations of Wisconsin native, Steven Avery. In 1985 Steven Avery was wrongly charged and convicted of crimes related to a sexual assault (Possley, 2012). After spending eighteen years of his life behind bars for a crime he did not commit, the DNA evidence gathered at the crime scene was retested in 2003. The tests revealed that Avery had nothing to do with the crime. The true assailant was another man already incarcerated in the Wisconsin correctional system for crimes committed after Steven Avery was unjustly sent to jail. The judicial proceedings in the 1985 trial of Steven Avery show the glaring problems with the processes of observation and judgment when those processes are not undertaken with sufficient objectivity and patience. The legal authorities in the 1985 case against Steven Avery did not fully consider the possibility that someone else might have

committed the crime, and this was based on (according to the docuseries) pervasive, negative opinions about Steven Avery and his family that operated an auto salvage business in Manitowoc County, Wisconsin. Ultimately, blinded by personal biases and hasty condemnations, police and litigators lost sight of the standard to which they are normally held, and convicted an innocent man.

The standard to which law enforcement entities are supposedly held, is that of presuming innocence. The principle and practice of presuming innocence derives from the 1895 legal proceedings of *Coffin vs. The United States*. The court in that case declared:

The law presumes that persons charged with crimes are innocent until they are proven by competent evidence to be guilty...and this presumption stands as their sufficient protection unless it has been removed by evidence proving their guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. ("The Presumption of Innocence in Criminal Cases," 1941)

The mindset of presuming innocence helps to establish a reference, a comparable mindset to the one necessary to carry out the processes of observation and judgment, as well as adequately address the issues present in the debate still raging over the athletic role model.

While watching "Making a Murderer" it is quite easy to make clear connections between the problems encountered by law enforcement in initially assessing Avery's case and the problems faced by sport supporters when athletes are implicated in criminal or undesired activities.¹ The problems though are analogous, not identical. In legal proceedings, the presumption of innocence seems to protect the accused of unnecessarily losing the liberties that come along with being an American citizen. The alternative to presuming innocence, presuming or suspecting guilt, damns the accused to a life devoid of many freedoms. In the mental operations of American sport fans, the problem faced is not preserving a presumption of innocence, in a legal sense. Beginning the processes of observation and judgment from a

presumption of innocence in the debate of the athletic role model is not the goal of this thesis because that goal would presuppose an innocent or guilty binary of possible outcomes. Another kind of presumption must be relied upon.

“To err is Humane”

Anecdotally, it seems that American sport supporters often tend to go beyond presuming or expecting innocence, and choose to presume and expect something more along the lines of perfection. For example, Wellman’s argument reflects the widespread expectation that athletes should be, and have additional reasons to be, perfect and pristine in their behavior. The presumption of perfection creates a great deal of problems should an athlete not live up to that ideal, which is often the case. The sports supporter would then be left to conclude after their athletic role model fails to attain consistent perfect that the athlete is perhaps damned, and potentially beyond redemption. This state of affairs has no upside, it is a lose-lose situation, either an athlete lives their life in extrinsically regulated ways in order to conform to the ideals of sport supporters, or an athlete messes up and fans are left wondering why they ever put their faith in someone so lacking in proper morality.

What is needed is a novel start to the process of determining not *if* an athlete is a role model, not *should* an athlete be a role model, but *what kind* of role model is an athlete being. The novel start suggested must create the possibility for more than two outcomes. While the criminal justice system operates on the precedent of presumption of innocence, the less systematic process of understanding the athletic role model must operate on the precedent of a *presumption of fallibility*. In many ways the approach put forth in this chapter can be distilled into a commonly shared, now somewhat cliché quote from the eighteenth century English poet, Alexander Pope. “To err is *Humane*; to Forgive, *Divine*” (Pope, 1711, p. 30). While I will refrain from discussing

the transcendent power of forgiveness, the human being, maybe by its very nature, its very constitution, is bound to fail. This fact is echoed in the Christian faith in the form of man's original sin (Carroll & Prickett, 2008, Genesis 3:1-24). While Christian teachings recognize the original sin (man's nature to err against the will of God) and provide teachings on living a life without sin, the faith does not necessarily expect or presume perfection. The Christian god is a skeptical one, hopeful for man made in its own image, yet unsure enough that it is ready to forgive (Carroll & Prickett, 2008, Mark 11:25-26). Again, this is not a religious thesis. The foundations of Christianity though, establish an already developed reference points of thought that can be used to better elucidate and substantiate the claims in this thesis. The foundations of the new philosophic approach being presented here can already be identified, in part, in other systems of thought and belief, both of humans (legal system) and the deity (religion). Applying a *presumption of fallibility* is not necessarily radical, but it is novel in the domain of sport philosophy, specifically in the debate over the athletic role model.

Presuming fallibility aligns with the preservation of autonomous action. The importance of action, and reflection on that action, is accounted for in both the Christian faith, the existential tradition of philosophy, and in this thesis. As was discussed in chapter three, existentialism allows for exercising personal autonomy in acting, and it is from action that we can begin to understand the athlete as a role model. Because human action is autonomous and free from social or divine determination, it is certainly possible for human action to take unwanted forms and have unwanted consequences. Meaning, we must get comfortable with not only the distinct possibility of athletes behaving poorly, but the actuality that they will behave in ways we do not always appreciate. In preparing for athletes to behave poorly, we cannot forget the possibility that we too will err. The fallibility of autonomous human action is not necessarily a negative quality of the account of human action present in this thesis and echoed in existentialism and Christianity.

Because this approach demands patient observation and tentative judgment, it allows for the possibility of learning from witnessing others behave in undesired ways. We control our response to poor behavior. If an athlete behaves poorly, it could set a bad example for a fan, but because that fan is an autonomous individual the fan could choose to act in a different way, a better way. This thesis does not necessarily condone poor behavior but it does not neglect the possible educative and instructive value in properly reflecting on poor behavior. Because the previous philosophic accounts of the athletic role model discussed in chapter three do not directly account for the fallibility of athletes and all human beings, none of those accounts raise the possibility of benefitting from the demonstration of poor behavior, making the new approach presented in this thesis uniquely useful. Each action is not a referendum on our value as human beings, but rather each action is part and parcel in a collection of actions that comprise our journey through life. It is up to us to understand both the striving for success and reflection on failure as part of the meaning of our lives and the lives of athletes.

Presuming fallibility in the debate of the athletic role model offers further advantages over previous conceptions of the athletic role model already discussed in chapter three of this thesis. By presuming fallibility, fans are prepared to mentally metabolize the behavior of an athlete, whatever it may be. The cognitive resources of a fan are always primed to come to grips with an athlete's behavior, on or off the field. Yet, presuming fallibility does not jade fans, making them weary with the knowledge that their favorite athlete might one day, do something wrong. Take Ray Rice's case from 2014. While holding the position of starting running back for the Baltimore Ravens, a video of Ray Rice surfaced on various media outlets, clearly showing him dragging his fiancée, Janay Palmer, out of a hotel elevator after knocking her out. The act was ugly, but unfortunately, such acts of domestic abuse are quite common. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2014), the same year Rice knocked out his now wife, one in four women will experience some form of severe physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner

(CDC, 2014, p. 1). That rate is terribly high. Ray Rice's violent, physical outburst against his now wife, unfortunately, is not necessarily a rare type of crime.² We just don't expect professional athletes to make such errors in judgment and commit such despicable offenses. That is what makes coming to terms with cases such as Ray Rice's so difficult for the average sport supporter.³

But what if we cease expecting certain outcomes? As it stands those expectations of athlete behavior are founded on little more than a widely held belief that athletes are role models. The idea of the athletic role model right now is far too often the cart before the horse. No philosophic progress can be made so long as athletes are believed to be role models simply because they are celebrated athletes (Wellman, 2003). Yet we don't want to discount the ability and possibility of athletes to positively affect the world in various ways through various means (Feezell, 2005). Athletes, just as we all do, have more to offer the world than just their craft. The new approach to understanding the athletic role model in this thesis addresses both the potential of athletes to be good Samaritans, quasi saints even, but it also accounts for the potential of athletes to simply be fantastic physical performers in their respective sports. In order to incorporate both ends of what seems to be a spectrum or continuum, without intellectually having to camp out in one extreme, multiple categories of athletic role modeling should be considered.

The Call for Categories

In order to create the possibility of categories, kinds, or qualities of role modeling, we must accept the possibility of role modeling by degrees. Just as there exist degrees of criminal charges to fully address the variety of illegal human behavior, along with classifications of laudable (philanthropic volunteer to founder of non-profit organization), so too should there be degrees and kinds of role modeling to fully address the variety of role modeling behaviors possible. In short, the new philosophic approach of this chapter mainly consists of a pluralistic

conception of the athletic role model, consisting of four categories that will be presented but preceded by important caveats.

Definitional Considerations

Before presenting the categories of role modeling that comprise the new philosophic approach of this thesis, certain caveats and definitional considerations must be raised. The following categories do not necessarily represent an exhaustive list. The categories are based off of observations of athletic behavior and curious inquiry. The four categories are not fixed, but rather fluid. Athletes can move from category to category based on their behavior over time. This conceptual point is unique to the previously discussed conceptions of Wellman and Feezell, finds its beginning in the thought of Spurgin, and its home in existentialist philosophy. For both Wellman and Feezell, their descriptions of the athletic role model are quite limited. Either athletes are moral exemplars or they are lusus objects. Instead, athletes in the new approach presented here can be *x* or can be *y*, depending on certain explanatory variables that will be elucidated in short order.

The four categories apply to professional athletes due to the strong and inescapable influences of commercial entities such sport franchises and corporations that stand to potentially profit off of an athlete's image as a role model or not. Consider in chapter one how it was shown that Nike profited off of both the image of Michael Jordan as a role model and Charles Barkley as the anti-role model. While monetary factors do play a part in the determination of what kind of a role model an athlete is, that part is only one component of the overall determination and must be considered among other factors that will soon be highlighted. While these specific categories apply to professional athletes, the possibility of amateur athletes (college and high school in particular) serving as role models cannot be discounted. Professional athletes, due to modern

media technologies such as television and the internet, stand to affect more people than the local star quarterback, point guard, or outfielder. Thus, focusing this new approach on the professional athlete offers the most bang for our philosophic buck.

These categories exist on a horizontal continuum, but not a vertical, hierarchical one in which one category is necessarily superior to another. Due to the fact that criteria for these categories involves the expression of unique personal identities, placing the categories in a hierarchical structure would implicitly discourage certain qualities of expression. These categories transcend any specific sport, ethnicity, sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Also, these categories exist on a horizon, each category representing a different path of sorts to an undetermined place. That path is not necessarily straight or fixed. Athletes, as they continue to exist, moving throughout their lives and careers, are free to choose new, different targets on the horizon (categories), becoming different types of role models in the process. It is with these definitional considerations in mind that the four categories can now be described in detail.

Maximal – Exemplary

The first of the four categories demands the most of an athlete in terms of awareness, effort, and consciousness. While there are serious philosophic issues with Christopher Wellman's account and argumentation for the athletes as moral exemplars, it is definitely possible for athletes to hold that status. Wellman's argument fails in its normative reach, but not in its possibility. Athletes surely have the ability to demonstrate virtue and morality in a way that positively impacts and guides the people around them, young and old. Athletes, just like everyone else in society, can carry our supererogatory acts, or those act that are not reasonable to be asked of all, but can be appreciated as good by all. This new approach will not dismiss of the account of

the morally exemplary athlete, but it will resist the urge to claim that all athletes are or must be moral exemplars.

To modify Wellman's account of moral exemplarism and fit it into the new category of maximal-exemplary role modeling, the athlete's autonomy must be accounted for. In this category, athletes are both aware of their highly visible place in society and they choose to use their social station of celebrated athlete as a means to positively affect more people. Athletes behave well and act supererogatorily, with an awareness that they will positively affect more people because they are athletes. An athlete must choose to become an exemplary role model through explicit declarations of intent and purpose to the public, such as that choice and declaration of Novak Djokovic (Bishara & Davies, 2016). Due to the broad expectations that come along with exemplary kind of role modeling, clear, autonomous assumption of the role is necessary. If an athlete chooses to position themselves in this category, they must demonstrate behavior reasonably worthy of emulation in all phases of life, both in the context of their sport, and outside of that context. Behavior reasonably worthy of emulation, is defined as behavior that widely resonates with others as practically adoptable.

In sport, an exemplary role model plays in such a way that their performance can be reasonably emulated. Athletic performance worthy of emulation might, in the language of Simon, reflect sport's inner morality, or in the language of MacIntyre (1981), cultivate internal goods. That athletic performance need not necessarily be elite, and the athlete need not be an all-star, to be worthy of emulation. For an exemplary athletic role model, sport should not be an instrumental activity, the value of which lies in such things as garnering fame or financial gain. Rather, for an exemplary athletic role model, sport should be seen as an intrinsically valuable activity. An exemplary athletic role model never loses sight of how sport provides an opportunity for the cultivation and practice of virtue, as well as the need to preserve the same opportunity for competitors.

Outside of sport, an exemplary athletic role model must behave in a way that reflects and build off of their athletic performance, satisfying three conditions in the process. First, they must acknowledge the law of the land, something that three of the four role modeling categories must do. Second, similar to their behavior in the context of sport, exemplary athletic role models must treat other people and opportunities as ends in themselves, not as means to separate ends. Third, athletes must use their socially revered position as an athlete to have a greater positive impact on their surroundings than they would be able to as a normal member of society. In this way, athletes are practicing an instrumental behavior, but it is only insofar as they can use their celebrated athletic status as a means to promote values reasonably worthy of promotion such as benevolence, kindness, and respect, for example.

An exemplary athletic role model must be intrinsically motivated to satisfy the conditions of this category. The athlete must choose to incorporate their exemplary role modeling into their personally determined conception of the good life. In this way, exemplary role modeling is a holistic quality of role modeling, one where there cannot be theoretical or practical lines drawn between the person and the athlete. An exemplary athletic role model is a self-motivated living, breathing, embodiment of behavior worthy of emulation. Examples of such athletes are Stephen Curry, Derek Jeter, Novak Djokovic, and Russell Wilson, all of whom use their status as celebrated athletes to positively impact the lives of others (Curry, 2015; Bishara & Davies, 2016; Rodrick, 2015; White, 2014).

Moderate - Autonomous

The category of moderate-autonomous role model differs from the category of maximal-exemplary in slight but important ways. In both categories an athlete chooses to become a role model, with a full understanding of the expectations that come along with that designation. A

maximal-exemplary role model chooses to offer up her entire life as worthy of emulation, whereas a moderate-autonomous athlete only offers up certain parts of her life. While the difference might seem too subtle for a distinction, a hypothetical example will better highlight the difference.

A maximal-exemplary athlete, in meetings with the press or fans, will declare explicitly that he wishes to generally set a good example and be a role model for others. There is a broadness to the role modeling goals of a maximal-exemplary athlete. In the case of the moderate-autonomous athlete, there is great specificity to his role modeling goals. A moderate-autonomous athlete might declare that he would like to help others develop into better athletes, or he might choose a specific cause to support, such as offering after school sports for kids in low-income communities, or sexual violence awareness. In response to a specific declaration of role modeling goals, the athlete would be expected to demonstrate behavior that closely aligns with those goals. If an athlete chooses to publicly support spreading awareness to prevent sexual violence, then that athlete should be expected to always practice respect for their partner in their private life. The role model expectations that come along with the moderate-autonomous category are less extensive than that of the maximal-exemplary category, and are tied directly to how the athlete explicitly chooses to be a role model for others making supererogatory acts a possibility in specific situations.

The moderate-autonomous athlete, just as the maximal-exemplary athlete, views both the activities of sport and life as inherently valuable, not as means to separate ends. Unlike the maximal-exemplary category, a moderate-autonomous athlete, because of highly specific role modeling goals, preserves realms of their life from role modeling expectations leaving room for exploring what their personal good life is. That exploration cannot include illegal behavior, but can include legal behavior that should not reasonably be emulated by others. Activities such as

frequent partying, visible alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, or reckless spending of their money could be included in the preserved exploration of their good life.

Moderate-autonomous athletes can be slightly difficult to recognize because they do not make their whole life available as an example for others. A current example though, of a moderate-autonomous role model is golfer John Daly, who both established a charitable foundation in 2004 to help the impoverished but also chooses to smoke cigarettes while playing in tournaments (Kerr-Dineen, 2015; PGA). Daly's charitable efforts are worthy of emulation, but his habitual smoking, while completely legal, is most certainly not worthy of emulation. If though, Daly were to explicitly support the Truth anti-tobacco public campaign, he should reasonably be expected to kick his smoking habit to align with his newly adopted, specific role modeling goals. If while supporting the Truth campaign John Daly was seen smoking on the PGA Tour, he could reasonably be critiqued for having failed his role modeling expectations.

Athletes in this category of role modeling are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. While these athletes are not internally driven to be a role model for all and in all things, the moderate-autonomous athlete is internally driven to be a role model and positive influence for specific peoples and purposes. These athletes though, also acknowledge the external impetus for behaving well that comes from their social visibility, and choose to reasonably modulate their behavior because of that visibility. A maximal-exemplary athlete capitalizes off of their social position to have a greater positive effect, whereas a moderate-autonomous athlete simply understands that they are in a social position to have the kind of positive effect they see fit. The moderate-autonomous athlete incorporates both responsibility and freedom in a balance that ultimately benefits their surroundings in some capacity.

Moderate - Contextual

While the previous two categories have involved intrinsically motivated role modeling behaviors, the moderate-contextual category does not. Moderate-contextual athletes can role model in two highly specific senses related directly to their sport contexts.

First, athletes in this category model how to play their respective sport well while also treating the activity as an ends in itself. These athletes meet the tests of and succeed in competition in a way that can reasonably be emulated by other athletes. Second, these athletes can participate in activities that positively affect their surroundings, but those activities are provided by the team or sport organization of which they are a member, provided by their sponsors, or contractually demanded of them. The role modeling expectations of moderate-contextual athletes are tied specifically and only to their social status as successful, celebrated athletes.

A prime example of moderate-contextual role modeling can be found in the NFL's "Play 60" campaign, which was founded in order to combat the modern problem of childhood obesity by encouraging kids to get more exercise (NFL, 2006). The NFL uses football as a means to get kids more active, and draws on the athletic success of their players to promote their initiative. Details on how certain players become intimately involved in the program are not available, but the pertinent point is that NFL players who become involved in the Play 60 campaign are accepting role modeling expectations that have been predetermined by the organization of which they are a part. Meaning, to satisfy and meet their role modeling expectations all these athletes must do is attend scheduled events and continue being NFL players. The expectations of a moderate-contextual athlete are far less in degree and scope compared to those of the maximal-exemplary and moderate-autonomous athlete. The moderate-contextual athlete exercises their

autonomy, but only in choosing to respond to external motivators and accepting externally defined role modeling expectations.

This category also provides an account of the athlete who falls from their celebrated social place and who might be outside of sport, like Marion Jones, Barry Bonds, or Pete Rose. Because this category is primarily concerned with the way that athletes role model *qua athlete*, it provides fans the opportunity to appreciate and emulate the athletic skills of athletes without feeling the need to respond to or account for the lack of virtuous skill. This category also allows athletes who find themselves toiling in social disapproval to understand their own place. In the case of Pete Rose, the moderate-contextual category allows him to say about himself and his own life, “Don’t gamble like I gambled, but play baseball like I played baseball.” This category then helps fans understand how to take the good and leave the bad. By opening up the possibility for athletes to be role models only as athletes, the new philosophic approach of this thesis does not leave out any athletes in its account.

By participating in such contextually driven role modeling, the moderate-contextual athlete preserves quite a great deal of room for personally exploring their good life. When these athletes are not “being athletes” they have quite a bit of freedom to act as they see fit, without necessarily participating in illegal, destructive, or harmful behaviors. Should an athlete participate in illegal activity, that athlete’s athletic achievement would likely be the only quality of their lives potentially worthy of emulation by others. This category is perhaps the most heavily occupied by modern athletes.

Minimal - Dismissive

The minimal-dismissive category of role modeling is defined by full resistance to conventional role model expectations. How then can minimal-dismissive be a kind of role

modeling? Minimal-dismissive role models only model behavior for others who also similarly resist conventional role model expectations. These athletes recognize the external motivators for assuming degrees of role modeling expectations, but they choose to pay those external motivators no mind. The minimal-dismissive role model is an intrinsically motivated kind of role modeling but in a significantly different way than the also intrinsically motivated maximal-exemplary kind of role modeling.

Minimal-dismissive role models, intrinsically motivated, autonomously choose to preserve their own autonomy, they exercise their freedom in order to protect their own freedom. These athletes might risk social critiques, media backlash, and even financial penalties in their personal maintenance of their own autonomy, individuality, and freedom. When Charles Barkley, in 1993, declared, "I am not a role model." he assumed the position of and spoke in support of the athlete as a minimal-dismissive role model.

The minimal-dismissive role model does not necessarily see sport as an end in and of itself, but rather an enjoyable means to express their own individual identity as an athlete. These athletes do not necessarily break rules, but they are more focused on competitive and personal success rather than appealing to any Simonian inner morality or striving to cultivate MacIntyre's internal goods (MacIntyre, 1981; Simon, 2015). Former Detroit Piston and Chicago Bull bad boy Dennis Rodman stands out as a clear example of minimal-dismissive role model.

Rodman was always known for his unique combination of ferocious rebounding, stifling defense, and disregard for social convention. On the cover of his biography *Bad as I Wanna Be*, the heavily tattooed, pierced, with dyed red haired Rodman (1996) is depicted sitting backwards on a black motorcycle, naked, with only a basketball hiding his genitals. While Rodman was a successful basketball player, elected into the hall of fame in 2011, his style of playing on the court, and his style of living off the court is not necessarily reasonably worthy of emulation. That is not to say the way he lived and played was wrong, but that the way he lived and played was

more of a manifestation of how he wanted to live his own life than a manifestation of how he believes others should live their lives or play their sport.

While the new approach presented in this thesis does not condone harmful illegal behavior, it can account for instances in which athletes feel the need to resist legal requirements in the process of standing for what they believe to be fair and just. For example, Muhammad Ali broke the law when he refused induction into the United States army during the Vietnam War, citing religious reasons (Zang, 2001, p. 102). Ali used his position as a celebrated athlete to take a stance on an issue important to him, and while it was illegal, it was not necessarily wrong. With the perspective that the passage of time uniquely allows, Ali's actions seem less reprehensible and more respectable. This category of athletic role modeling provides the opportunity for athletes to challenge the status quo.

The minimal-dismissive role model challenges convention, and provides an example for other athletes to follow who wish to succeed greatly and live uniquely. If conventional role modeling expectations might be preventing certain athletes from even attempting to become role models in a more exemplary way, those athletes deserve the chance to be role models on their own terms, and the minimal-dismissive category could provide them that exact chance.

Table - Role Modeling Categories

	Primary Locus of Motivation	Supererogatory Acts	Respects Rules of Sport	Respects Laws of Society
Maximal - Exemplary	Internal	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moderate - Autonomous	Internal	Maybe	Yes	Yes
Moderate – Contextual	External	No	Yes	Yes
Minimal - Dismissive	Internal	No	Yes	Maybe

FIGURE 1 – Role Modeling Definitions

From Here on Out

This chapter began with a call to shift mindsets, a call to change how we think about the athletic role model. Prior to the introduction of this new approach, previous approaches began with certain presuppositions and biases that resulted in dichotomous, rigid conceptions of the athletic role model. Simon, Wellman, Feezell, Spurgin all argue for a certain, singular nature of the athletic role model. To open up the possibility of a more fluid, pluralistic conception of the athletic role model, it was argued that observation and judgement of athletes must begin with a presumption of fallibility. From that presumption, different kinds of role modeling become possible to describe and discuss. The four kinds of role modeling presented here represent an initial attempt at broadening the ways in which athletes can be considered role models. The list might grow and the descriptions might need to be altered especially considering the rapidly evolving nature of the modern world and sport. Over time these categories might undergo revision, just as an athlete can revise their own personal status as role model in this new approach. While over time these categories might change, now is the time to push our

understanding of the athletic role model forward, to adopt this new approach, and from here on out seek only to better know and accept the ways in which athletes can become role models.

Notes:

¹ Criminal, illegal activities are not condoned in this new approach, but the spectre of them is raised here because athletes have been implicated in them (O.J. Simpson for example) and the sport-loving public must confront their reactions to media coverage of athletes implicated in possible or confirmed illegal behavior.

² While the average rate of NFL player criminal involvement is lower than that of the general population (likely due to the generally higher affluence of the average NFL player compared to the average American citizen), certain crimes are proving to “trail the pack significantly,” according to Benjamin Morris of the former Fivethirtyeight Sports in an article titled “The Rate of Domestic Violence Arrests Among NFL Players.” Domestic abuse rates are 55.4 percent that of the national average, and it, “accounts for 48 percent of arrests for violent crimes among NFL players, compared to our estimated 21 percent nationally” (Morris, 2014). Domestic abuse is clearly a problem in the NFL, making Ray Rice’s behavior far from shocking.

³ Ray Rice is used as a primary example while introducing this chapter for multiple reasons. Football has appeared to overtake baseball as America’s favorite pastime. According to an April 2015 Bloomberg Politics Poll, 67 percent of the 1,008 participants selected football as America’s favorite pastime (Bloomberg, 2015). Scrutinizing a player in America’s favorite pastime seems like a good way into assessing the status of the athletic role model in professional sports in the United States, Ray Rice falling into that category as one of the National Football League’s most prolific rushers. Not only that, but Ray Rice prior to striking Janay Palmer, and while a member of the Baltimore Ravens, was seen as not only, “one of the best playmakers in the game,” but also, “important to the Baltimore community,” due in part to having “spearheaded an anti-bullying campaign in Baltimore,” and having, “opened up his football camp to thousands of underprivileged kids!” (Van Valkenburg, 2014).

Conclusion

Living From and Going Forward

To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim and what is given, between the intention and the performance - and our body is our anchorage in a world.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 167)

At the onset of this investigation the question of “*Are* athletes role models?” was raised. It was soon vacated for the more philosophical question of “*Should* athletes be role models?” As was mentioned in chapter two, the question of *should* escapes the limiting grips of the naturalistic fallacy. The question of *should* athletes be role models not only raised issues related to the athlete but the fan as well. The thesis explored ways in which the athlete can view themselves, as well as ways in which fans can view athletes. The answer to the guiding question of *should*, is that athletes *should* be role models how they themselves see fit. In response to that answer, the new approach presented in this thesis offered four categories, or ways in which fans can understand how athletes choose to role model. While on the face of it, the implementation of categories might seem to confound rather than to clarify the debate of the athletic role model, the potential need for and utility of categories was established throughout this thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis offered an historical account of the athletic role model in modern American sport. Chapter one revealed both a consistent historical desire to call athletes role models as well as challenges to that desire, pointing to a general lack of consensus on the idea of the athletic role model. In chapter two, the sides of the debate of the athletic role model were clarified, and relevant arguments in that debate were surveyed. After parsing out the many issues related to the debate of the athletic role model, it became clear that the debate needed to

take a new direction in the hopes of advancing the collective understanding of the athletic role model. In chapter three, the prevailing philosophical accounts of the athletic role model were critiqued with an eye towards both their strengths and weakness. A critique of the prevailing philosophic accounts made clear the need for a less rigid and less dualistic understanding of the athletic role model that accounted for the autonomy and diversity of athletes in a complex world. In chapter four a new approach to understanding the athletic role model was presented, consisting of four categories. Those four categories opened up different kinds of role modeling, thus avoiding the downfalls and restrictions of dichotomous, black and white, yes or no conceptions of the athletic role model.

Implementing this new philosophic approach offers benefits for athletes, fans, and scholars. Because the four categories allow for flexible and fluid demonstration of behavior over time, without normative judgement, athletes will no longer feel socially coerced into acting a certain way. Athletes instead will feel free to make of their lives what they wish, expressing their unique identity in and away from sport, hopefully achieving great success, but not feeling irredeemable if they fail. To allow an athlete to exercise their autonomy and for time to reveal new meanings, it is necessary for fans to shift their thinking.

This new approach calls on fans to practice patient reflection in the judgement on an athlete's role model status. The practice of reflection will allow for fans to more often select athletic role models that will set an example worthy of emulation. The practice of reflection will also help fans defend their moral compasses and learn from mistakes if their athletic role model lets them down. Because both athletes and fans stand to benefit from the adoption of this new philosophic approach to understanding the athletic role model, perhaps the relationship between both groups will be positively affected. Athletes will no longer feel unduly coerced into being whatever the fans wish, but rather understood and appreciated for who they are as fallible, athletic people. And fans will no longer feel worried about moral abandonment, tired of clinging on to

hollow ideals about what athletes should be, and instead they will be ready to appreciate and forgive athletes depending on how they behave over time. There is a third party, an observant one to the athlete-fan dynamic that also stands to benefit from this new approach.

As was shown in chapter three, the previous discourse on the athletic role model left room for much needed exploration. While this thesis engaged with that unexplored philosophic territory, this thesis by no means charted all of it. But, by expanding the debate on the athletic role model, nuancing it further, and offering a non-analytic account, this thesis will hopefully inspire scholars to continue the rethinking of the debate on the athletic role model, considering it from different academic vantage points and employing a diverse set of investigative skills in the process. Revisions to the conclusions in this thesis will be welcome, so long those revisions stem from the shift in thinking away from rigid, impersonal conceptions of the athletic role model and towards a conception that accounts for the inescapable intricacies and difficulties of life. This thesis is meant to advance the debate of the athletic role model, to provide a theoretical bridge between the past we can learn from, and the future we can better understand going forward.

In understanding the athletic role model we must account for the tension between what we wish, or our aims, and what we have, or what is given. We must find harmony in that tension between our desires and our reality. We cannot let our desires for athletes to be role models blind us to the actuality of what it means to be a human being navigating the often overwhelming intricacies of life. Living life can be tremendously difficult without any added expectations of being a role model. But we also cannot be jaded by that tremendous difficulty and deny ourselves the hope that certain individuals might rise above that adversity in a way that inspires us and guides us from a distance. Many people, through no fault of their own, will find themselves in tough situations, surrounded by negative influences, and a celebrated athlete could provide a beacon of possibility, an example of what they can become and what they can achieve regardless of prior circumstance. It is in the best interest of fans and athletes to respect the many ways in

which we all try to best face the various rigors of life. It is in the best interest of us all to realize an athlete is a person too.

This thesis provides a movement towards a harmony between what we aim for and what is given before us. In the process, this thesis provides a better understanding of the athletic role model that we can all feel comfortable and confident in collectively applying to the complicated landscape of modern sport.

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