

# In Defense of the Playoff System

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According to some philosophers of sport, the decision to use a playoff system in American sports is driven more by the desire to maximize profits than to determine the most talented player or team in a given sport. In "On Winning and Athletic Superiority," for example, Nicholas Dixon claims that the playoff system is not the best measure of athletic excellence, even though it may be a good means for increasing the entertainment value of sports (1). According to Dixon, the best way to measure athletic excellence is to use a system, such as a season long championship, that "minimizes the impact of unjust results in individual games due to such factors as poor refereeing, cheating, gamesmanship, and bad luck" (1: p. 232). In a playoff system, as Dixon points out, it is quite possible that the "best" team does not actually win the championship since the result of any particular game may hinge on factors not directly related to athletic superiority. While a team might play better during postseason playoffs, this does not justify the claim that it is the best team of the year. Yet, in some sports, such as NFL football, the winner of the playoffs is dubbed the "best team of the year" even though it might not truly deserve the title. Playoff games, Dixon admits, can be very exciting and suspenseful, and therefore financially rewarding for sports organizations, but they are not the best measure of athletic excellence. Thus, Dixon suggests that we "reexamine our attitude toward the playoff system in American professional sport" (1: p. 231). Following Dixon's lead, William Morgan argues that the desire for profit in American professional sports leads to a deterioration of athletic excellence. Speaking of the choice of a playoff system, Morgan infers that the primary motivation is financial because "the allure of the playoffs is that they attract large audiences and, in turn, large television revenues" (4: p. 28). If professional sports leagues, in other words, were concerned with improving the quality of play, they should choose a system that fosters athletic excellence rather than a system that produces fan excitement.

In this paper, I offer a defense of the playoff system in response to the arguments of Dixon and Morgan. As I see it, Dixon and Morgan convincingly argue that our current attitudes toward the playoff system require adjustment and revision. However, when it comes to making institutional changes, whether on a professional or amateur level, their arguments fall short. More specifically, I argue that Dixon and Morgan have a too cynical view of the playoff system in that they believe that the choice to use a playoff system is motivated simply by the desire

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for financial gain. In response, I argue that a playoff system is still a good choice for determining the champion in a given sport, even though the system is not ideal. My goal is not to say that the playoff system is superior in all contexts, but that there are strong reasons for supporting it. The paper is divided into 3 sections. In the first section, I summarize the two main arguments against the playoff system. In the second section, I point out that both Dixon and Morgan provide good reasons for attitudinal changes, but not institutional ones. The third section explores the aims of athletic contests and how such aims are at the heart of the present issue.

## The Case Against the Playoff System

There are two main arguments against the playoff system. First, the playoff system places too much emphasis on only one criterion of athletic excellence, namely, the psychological tenacity to respond well to pressure. Second, the primary reason for adopting a playoff system is financial. In this section, I summarize these two arguments.

As Dixon points out, a “central purpose of competitive sport” is to provide a method that “determines which team or player is superior” (1: p. 220). However, Dixon argues, in some competitive events the best player or team does not actually win. Dixon refers to such cases as “failed athletic events” because they have “failed in their central comparative purpose, even though they may have succeeded in other goals like entertaining spectators” (1: p. 220). Dixon rightly points out that athletic contests might fail for many reasons, such as poor refereeing calls, cheating, or just plain bad luck. In some cases, a failed athletic contest might also occur because a superior team simply plays poorly or an inferior team plays exceptionally well (or perhaps a combination of both). In most failed athletic events, however, the victor does not truly deserve to win. Assuming that failed athletic contests do occur, it is important to notice that such contests have much greater consequences during the playoffs than in the regular season. If it is true that better teams sometimes lose, then a failed athletic contest during the playoffs could lead to a situation where the “best team” is eliminated earlier than it should be. According to Dixon, many people falsely assume that the best team of any given year is the one that is victorious in the postseason. For example, sports fans and commentators frequently refer to the Superbowl Champions as the year’s best NFL team. The Super Bowl victory of the New York Giants over the New England Patriots in 2007 is a case in point. Should we honestly claim that the Giants were the best team of 2007 due to their performance in the postseason even though the Patriots maintained a perfect record until their loss in the Super Bowl game? According to Dixon, most NFL enthusiasts are guided by the assumption that the “best players, especially the great ones, are those who come through to achieve victory when it matters most: post-season playoff games” (1: p. 229). With this assumption in place, one should not claim that the Patriots were the best NFL team of 2007. The concept of athletic excellence, Dixon claims, has come to be understood as “the ability to perform well under pressure, when the stakes are the highest, rather than as the ability to perform well over the course of an entire season” (1: p. 229). “[W]e seem to have fetishized the ability to perform well

under pressure,” Nixon elaborates, “and given it far more importance as a criterion of athletic excellence than it deserves” (1: p. 230).

If it is true that a playoff system places undue emphasis on psychological toughness as an important athletic characteristic, then why do leagues choose the playoff system as the primary means for determining the championship title? The answer to this question leads to the second criticism of the playoff system, namely, that the choice is motivated primarily by financial considerations and not by a desire to determine the superior competitor.

If we persist in using the playoff system, we need to acknowledge that this is a choice and not a necessity. And this choice involves sacrificing a more accurate measure of athletic excellence – the season-long championship – in order to enjoy the financial benefits of the playoff system. By choosing this system, we decrease the possibility that the best team wins the championship (1: p. 232)

Of course, in some cases, logistics demand that a playoff system be used to crown a champion. In the World Games or the Olympics, for instance, it is necessary to find an efficient means of declaring a winner, since organizing a season of games is not feasible. Yet, in cases where there is a choice, Dixon implies that the playoff system is chosen “in order to enjoy the financial benefits.” Dixon is not alone in making this claim.

Morgan similarly claims that the “playoff system enjoys one distinct advantage, but it has nothing important to do with athletic excellence and everything to do with money” (4: p. 28). According to Morgan, “the allure of the playoffs is that they attract large audiences and, in turn, large television revenues that would not be possible” if the best team (or player) were determined by performance over an entire season (4: p. 28). “Playoffs,” Morgan further claims, “generate more fan interest by giving even relatively poorly performing teams—who would otherwise have long since been eliminated by their season records—a chance to make the playoffs” (4: p. 28). The playoffs, in other words, provide an excellent means for increased revenue because they give fans a new reason for watching their teams, even if the team has relatively little chance of winning. All of this shows, Morgan says, that organizers of American professional sports are “putting dollars above excellence” which directly results in a “decline in the quality of their play” (4: p. 29). For Morgan, however, the financial motivation behind the use of the playoff system is indicative not only of a decline in athletic excellence, but also of the “sorry moral condition” of American sports today (4: p. 25). The overwhelming desire for profits in American sports results in a “thorough going narcissism [that] permeates their ranks, a narcissism whose self-serving ways leave little, if any, room for consideration of the welfare of others in sports or for the larger good of these practices themselves” (4: p. 26). Seen in a broader moral context, then, the choice of a playoff system for Morgan is part and parcel of the numerous problems that arise from the infiltration of market forces into sports:

The incursion of the market and the brand of instrumental reason in which it trades, therefore, goes a long way toward explaining why in these sports winning trumps fair play; an assertive egoism triumphs over mutual moral respect; an anything-goes-as-long-as-I-don't-get-caught attitude prevails over expressions of good will toward others; and a pervasive mistrust poisons most

interactions and relations in sports, undercutting any sense of solidarity—of community—within them (4: p. 26)

## **Reconsidering the Playoff System: Attitudinal or Institutional Change?**

Dixon convincingly argues that the playoff system is not the best means for determining athletic superiority and therefore needs to be “reexamined.” However, an ambiguity is lurking in his account on this matter that needs to be revealed. After legitimately pointing out the inadequacies of the playoff system, Dixon says that the “most important consequence of my reasoning is that we should reexamine our attitude toward the playoff system in American professional sport” (1: p. 231). However, he continues by criticizing the *decision* to use the playoff system, not just the *attitude* toward it. If a reexamination leads to the conclusion that our attitude toward the playoff system is faulty, then I suggest that we should simply change our attitude, not necessarily the system. However, if a reexamination leads to the conclusion that we should institute a different system, then the playoffs should be abandoned. Dixon, I believe, provides excellent reasons for an attitudinal shift, but does not offer a strong case for an institutional change.

Given the soundness of Dixon’s main argument, how should we shift our *attitude* toward the playoffs? I believe that sports enthusiasts and athletes should recognize the fact that a playoff winner is precisely that, a “playoff” winner. For example, we should recognize that the NY Giants were the 2007 Superbowl Champions, while the New England Patriots were the best team of the regular season. Do we really need to, or should we, say that the Superbowl Champions represent the best team of the year? Dixon’s argument adequately shows that we should answer this question negatively. Teams that exhibit superior play in the regular season may not win the playoffs. Does this mean that teams that perform well under the high stakes of playoff games are necessarily better than those team that perform well in the routine of the regular season? Again, Dixon is absolutely correct to claim that we should not put undue emphasis on psychological toughness as a primary determinant of athletic ability.

Dixon’s argument should also lead sports fans and players to recognize that failed athletic events also occur for reasons other than poor performance under pressure, e.g., on account of cheating, poor refereeing, or bad luck. In such cases, there may be good reasons to assume the better team or player lost. As far as attitude shifts are concerned, then, we should not accept the view “that the winning team or athlete in a playoff or similar tournament is *by definition* the best one” since a given playoff game may be a failed athletic contest (1: p. 231). Briefly put, Dixon provides us with excellent reasons for altering our attitude toward the playoff system.

If the playoff system is not the best way to determine athletic excellence, should it therefore be abandoned when not logistically necessary? To answer this question, we need to further explore the reasons for the institutional choice of a playoff system. Unfortunately, when it comes to the motivation behind the choice of a playoff system in American sports, Dixon and Morgan adopt the cynical view

that it is exclusively financial. As we have already seen, Dixon says that “[T]his choice involves sacrificing a more accurate measure of athletic excellence . . . in order to enjoy the financial benefits of the playoff system” (1: p. 232). While it may be true that American sports organizations actually choose to use a playoff system primarily for its financial profitability, this does not mean that there are no good reasons, internal to sports, for choosing a playoff system.

Dixon and Morgan imply that the only reason for using a less accurate measure of athletic excellence is financial gain. This implication naturally follows from his belief that a central goal, if not the central goal, of an athletic contest is to determine who is the better athlete. If we assume that the main goal of an athletic contest, or a series of contests over the course of a given time period, is to arrive at the most accurate ranking of athletic talent, then clearly the playoff system is not the best choice. However, when it comes to the organization of sports leagues, both professional and amateur, we must ask whether the main goal should be the determination of athletic excellence. In the following section, I pursue this line of inquiry.

## The Aims of Athletic Contests

What is the central purpose, if any, of an athletic contest? Why do athletes participate in a sporting event? Why do spectators spend their time watching athletes compete? Obviously, answers to these questions are many and various. In his *Fair Play in Sport*, Sigmund Loland offers a helpful categorization of the divergent goals of sporting activities (3). In the first case, there is the “structural goal of sport” which is “to measure, compare, and rank two or more competitors according to athletic performance” (3: p. 10). “This goal,” Loland claims, “seems to be common to all sports” and “it defines sport’s characteristic social structure” (3: p. 10). Second, sport involves the “intentional” goals of the participants which, to put it simply, are the subjective reasons leading individuals to participate in sport. As Loland points out, these two goals often come into conflict as they do, for example, in the area of our present concern. “The structural goal of measuring, comparing, and ranking competitors according to performance,” Loland says, “can be overruled by intentional goals among commercial interests aiming at producing TV entertainment” (3: p. 11). Such conflicts raise questions about a third goal of sport, namely, the “moral” goal: what role should sport play in our lives? How does it fit into our concept of human flourishing? In what sense are sports meaningful? Loland’s distinction provides conceptual clarity for the present discussion insofar as it shows that conflicts between the structural and intentional goals of sport often lead to a moral concern. To be more specific, the intentional goal of those who choose a playoff system, insofar as the goal is considered in terms of commercial interests, is in conflict with the structural goal of sport per se, i.e., the proper ranking of competitors. Furthermore, this conflict raises the moral question of whether the playoff system *deserves* our support.

In response to both Dixon and Morgan, I would like to point out that both philosophers underplay or neglect important intentional goals of both athletes and spectators who would choose a playoff system over a season-long championship. While Dixon and Morgan admit that a playoff system may be more entertaining

than other options, they imply that entertainment value is not a legitimate and inherent goal of sports, but that it is only important for monetary reasons. Even if the entertainment value is recognized as legitimate, Dixon and Morgan seem to say, it should be disregarded if it impedes with the goal of achieving athletic excellence. From the point of view of the athlete and spectator, however, the playoff system creates a level of suspense and drama that does not usually accompany a season-long championship system. Although organizers of professional sports league recognize this fact and use it to maximize profits, does this necessarily mean the playoff system is a poor choice from the perspective of the athlete and spectator? As far as the intentional goals of players and fans are concerned, I contend, the entertainment value of a sport must be taken into consideration. We must, in other words, consider why players and fans (not just sports leagues) might choose a playoff system since the existence of sport depends upon the interests of these individuals. All things considered, I believe the playoff system deserves our support because the intentional goals of athletes and fans to partake in a meaningful experience may sometimes outweigh the structural goal of determining the proper ranking among athletes. When I say the playoff system “deserves our support,” I am not claiming that it is necessarily the best system for all situations. Instead, I am making the more qualified claim that there are very good reasons for keeping it in place.

To support my belief, I would like to consider the issue from the perspective of a sports league organizer. Let us assume, for the moment, that we are in charge of a town-wide amateur soccer league with the field resources to accept eight teams. Further assume that we must choose one of two systems (1): a round-robin system wherein every team plays every other team twice or (2) a round-robin season wherein every team plays every other team once, followed by an elimination playoff system. In the second option, teams defeated in the playoffs would play placement games so that all teams ultimately play the same number of games. Given these two options, how do we decide which option is better? To answer this question, it would be helpful to draw a distinction between external and internal considerations. External considerations refer to those factors not directly related to the goals of competition itself, but perhaps to the goals of the league (such as financial sustainability), field space issues, availability of necessary personnel (such as referees), and other logistical considerations. For example, as sports league organizers, we may be concerned with maximizing the profits of the league, thus providing more job security for the board members and increasing the chances of the league’s continued existence. In this case, we may choose the playoff option because, for example, it may be more likely to increase the number of due paying participants. In addition, there may be enough interest in a championship game to run a profitable event at the end of the playoffs. On the other hand, perhaps the vast majority of participants prefer a round-robin system, the winner being determined by the best record at the end of the season. If this were the case, then the league’s existence might depend on opting for this system. In either case, if we make the determination in such a manner, we would be using external concerns to determine what system is better since financial and logistical considerations are not directly related to goals internal to sport.

While external considerations clearly influence sport league organizers, in many cases internal considerations are truly decisive. Internal considerations refer

to both the structural goals of athletic competition itself and the intentional goals of the competitors, such as the goals of ranking the competitors, of participating in an inherently enjoyable activity, of striving for athletic excellence, of improving one's health, and so on. Let us continue with our hypothetical situation of choosing a system for a town-wide soccer league. If we assume the external considerations are basically equal on both sides by assuming, for example, that both systems are financially profitable, equally demanding for fields and resources, and equally preferred by participants, then it seems that our decision would turn on internal considerations. More specifically, it seems that we would have to consider and weigh the structural goal of accurately ranking competitors against the intentional goals of the players. Of course, for some players, the structural goal is identified with the intentional goal. Some players, in other words, participate in sport precisely to discover how they rank in comparison with other players. However, I hope that most people would see that such a conception of the intentional goal of sport would be extremely thin, given that sport offers so much more than ranking competitors. In any case, as sports league organizers, we need to decide among competing goals of sport. If our main purpose is to find out what teams are athletically superior, then we should choose a round-robin system with no playoffs. However, by choosing this path, we are subordinating one athletic good to another; more specifically, our desire to gauge athletic excellence would lead us to deemphasize another legitimate goal of sport, i.e., the unique experience that occurs in playoff games. On the other hand, if we choose a playoff system, we must acknowledge Dixon's point that the end result may be an inaccurate ranking. However, I would like to emphasize that the choice for a playoff system would not be driven by considerations external to sport, but from the internal good of the playoff experience. To put it simply, as a participant and a spectator, I would rather have a season with a playoff system because it increases the enjoyment of sport while still being a good, although not the best, indicator of athletic excellence.

The choice of a system, then, should really be guided by one's conception of the goals of athletic contests. In contrast to Dixon and Morgan's view that the choice of a playoff system sacrifices athletic excellence for profits, I believe that a season-long championship sacrifices the heightened sense of drama and excitement that arises in playoff situations for a more accurate ranking of competitors. In my opinion, the intentional goal of enjoying the experience of competition deserves more weight than the structural goal of ranking competitors. Admittedly, my argument is thus far grounded on a subjective attitude concerning the goals of athletic contests. As I see it, and I know I am not alone, do-or-die situations are inherently interesting and that the playoff system is financially rewarding precisely because large numbers of people, at least in the United States, find the playoffs to be very suspenseful. This fact, however, should not be held against the choice or cynically interpreted. We should also recognize that athletes themselves may well prefer a playoff system to a season long championship.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than rely on personal experience and speculation about preferences, I would like to argue that a playoff system is often a good choice because it offers an appealing conception of the athletic contest and its goals. In making my argument, I rely heavily upon the reflections of Randolph Feezel offered in his *Sport, Play and Ethical Reflection* (2). According to Feezel, many sport theorists fail to

recognize one of the most attractive aspects of sport, i.e., the play element. Following the path set by Huizinga, Feezel employs a phenomenological approach that focuses on the lived experience of the athlete and/or spectator. For the present purposes, I would like to briefly discuss some ideas presented in his book's third chapter, "Sport, the Aesthetic, and Narrative." In this chapter, Feezel advances two primary claims: "First, sport provides the occasion for intrinsically interesting experiences, and insofar as it does, it is aesthetically valuable. Second, sport also provides contexts of meaning for people, narratives that become existentially valuable for selves seeking a meaning in life" (2: p. 33). Using Sartre's *Nausea* as a foil, Feezel attempts to show how narrative provides an organizational structure for what is an otherwise fragmentary existence. Antoine, the main character in Sartre's novel, views life as a series of meaningless events with no necessary connection to each other. While admitting that narratives might be used to provide a meaningful interpretation of events, Antoine believes that stories ultimately falsify existence by imposing a structure that is not truly there. Using Dewey's contrast between an "experience" and "having an experience," Feezel points out, contra Sartre, that life is not just an undifferentiated flow of experiences, but that some experiences offer a strong contrast to others. Having an experience, in this sense, seems to have two features: a temporal structure and a feeling of unity. When watching sports, Feezel claims, one has an experience in the Deweyan sense, insofar as the experience is unified and aesthetically rich. The reason why people might be captivated by such experiences is because of the way they provide points of contrast in the flow of ordinary life. As Feezel claims, "moments of experience are aesthetically interesting when integration is mediated by novelty; unity in development is colored by uncertainty; initiations are fulfilled by consummatory moments, not mere endings" (2: p. 40).

Sport provides us with one of the richest sources for narratives that can enhance our lives by providing a structure for more meaningful and connected experiences. For the present purposes, Feezel's description of watching a baseball game is apt.

To watch a baseball game is to move from ordinary experience in which episodic complications are alive with possibilities, organically developing in a teleologically directed movement. But a game may be 'embedded' . . . in a series, and a series may be embedded in an entire season. If we think about major league baseball, the narrative possibilities that we may identify with and vicariously experience are practically endless. For each game, each inning, even every pitch and at bat, is embedded in a complex historical setting . . . To love baseball is to immerse oneself in a world of transparent meanings, efficacious actions, heroic deeds, and admirable excellences. It is to identify with the story of a game, a team, a career, even one's own life (2: p. 45)

Accepting Feezel's point that a strong appeal of sport is the sense of fulfillment that arises from its narrative structure, one can see that a playoff system could well offer a more meaningful and richer experience than a season-long championship. Certainly, a season-long championship includes narrative possibilities that offer enriching experiences, but the playoff system provides us with, to put it simply, a better story. With a season-long championship, many of the games have an equal value, the "best" team may emerge long before the season



ends, and there are fewer opportunities for athletes to respond to high-pressure situations. A playoff system, by contrast, offers a culminating event that increases tension and drama; it produces more uncertainty and thereby heightens one's interest in the outcome; it allows for a distinction between types of games, where athletes are challenged in different ways. To put it simply, playoff games are more exciting, given their stakes. My preference for this system, then, is not based on my desire for a more profitable game, but my desire to play in or watch a more exciting game with higher stakes.

## Conclusion

The main goal of this paper has been to provide a critical response to the cynical view that the primary motivation for choosing a playoff system is financial and external to sport. While I defend the playoff system, I am not arguing that it is the best choice in all circumstances. Instead, I am arguing that the entertainment value of athletes and fans must be taken into consideration when making an institutional decision about organizing a sports league. From my own vantage point, choosing a system that maximizes the possibility of achieving the structural goal of sport would be a mistake since it would be based on an unappealing concept of sport. While an accurate ranking is certainly one of the many goals of sport, it should not necessarily take priority over the intentional goals of athletes and fans. In a world where a majority of athletes played sports primarily to discover their relative abilities, however, an organizational system that attempted to meet the structural goal of ranking competitors might be the best choice. However, such a world would be missing out on one of the most attractive aspects of sports, i.e., the fun and excitement of play.

## Notes

1. Part of my reason for making this claim is based on my own experience as a four-time national champion in the sport of Ultimate (popularly known as Ultimate Frisbee). The championship team in Ultimate is determined by a series of tournaments, wherein pool play is followed by elimination games. As might be expected, stronger teams usually win, although occasional upsets do occur. In the end, the national champion is almost always the "best" team, all things considered, although "lesser" teams sometimes win. After 10 years of participating in National Championships and 24 years of competitive Ultimate, I have never heard a player complain about the inadequacy of an elimination format. Instead, players themselves seem to genuinely enjoy the do-or-die experience even in cases where a stronger team loses to a weaker.

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