Achievements, Success and Goodness in Sports

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Abstract

In this article I provide some theoretical basis for evaluating the successfulness of an athlete, the goodness of an athlete and the magnitude of an athlete's achievements as well as for understanding their interrelationships. Related to this, an important aim of this article is to show that there are many philosophically interesting and complex questions related to achievements, success and goodness in sports and that consequently various votings and polls about athletes that are connected to achievements, success and goodness are philosophically far from uninteresting.

Keywords: Achievement, success, athletic excellence, sport

Resumen

En este artículo aporto algunas bases teóricas para evaluar el éxito, la calidad y la magnitud de los logros de un atleta. Vinculado a ello, un importante objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que hay muchas cuestiones filosóficamente interesantes y complejas relacionadas con los logros, el éxito y la calidad en los deportes, y consecuentemente, las diversas votaciones y encuestas a cerca de los atletas, conectadas a los logros, éxito y calidad, están lejos de ser filosóficamente poco interesantes.

 Palabras clave: Logro, éxito, excelencia atlética, deporte

1. Introduction

Many people like comparing athletes to each other. Questions like who is the athlete of the year, who is the football player of the century and who is the boxer of the decade are asked often and votings and polls about these kinds of questions are common. It should be noticed, however, that all these questions are very ambiguous, as it is far from clear what is at stake when these questions are asked. On the other hand, questions like who is the greatest athlete ever and who is the greatest football player of the century are more specific, as it is clear that it is greatness which is at stake when these questions are asked.[1] The problem is,

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[1] To the best of my knowledge, this has not been pointed out by anyone in the philosophy of sport literature.

however, that it is far from clear how the greatness of an athlete should be evaluated or determined.

It seems to me that there are at least three natural and plausible ways to interpret questions like who is the athlete of the year, who is the football player of the century and who is the boxer of the decade. First, they could be interpreted as questions about the most *successful* athlete of the year, the most successful football player of the century and the most successful boxer of the decade. Secondly, they could be interpreted as questions about the *best* athlete of the year, the best football player of the century and the best boxer of the decade. Thirdly, they could be interpreted as questions about which athlete *achieved* most in some specific year, which football player achieved most in some specific century and which boxer achieved most in some specific decade, or to put differently, who was the greatest athlete of some specific year, who was the greatest football player of some specific century and who was the greatest boxer of some specific decade. In this article I provide some theoretical basis for evaluating the successfulness of an athlete, the goodness of an athlete and the magnitude of an athlete's achievements as well as for understanding their interrelationships.[2]

I should perhaps note that this article is a theoretical rather than practical (or applied) study of achievements, success and goodness in sports. For example, an article that concentrates on the question who is the best football player of all time would be an example of a practical study of goodness in football. And an article that concentrates on the question whether Floyd Mayweather Jr. is one of the greatest boxers of all time would be an example of a practical study of greatness (i.e. achievements) in boxing. In this article I provide theoretical basis for practical studies of achievements, success and goodness in sports.

2. Achievements and Success

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[2] In the context of team sports the concept of the MVP (the most valuable player) is important. So for example, if some players and coaches vote on "the Player of the Season" in some specific basketball league, some of them may make their decision on the basis of whom they consider the MVP in that league in that season. However, since in this article I am concerned with sports generally rather than only team sports and since I also do not have anything to add to the existing discussions about the concept of the MVP in the philosophy of sport literature (Kershnar & Feit 2001; Kershnar 2008), I do not discuss the concept of the MVP in this article.

The successfulness of an athlete during some time period (e.g. in his whole career or some specific year) is naturally determined on the basis of how much success he had or has had during that time period. In sports winning a contest is perhaps the clearest example of a success. But clearly one can be successful in a sports contest without winning it. For example, finishing second in the 10,000 metres in the Olympic Games is, at the very least, a very big success and probably a huge success.

It is, however, far from clear what exactly success is and how exactly the successfulness of an athlete should be measured. I cannot answer these difficult questions in this article. However, what I want to point out here is that although undoubtedly an athlete's successfulness and the magnitude of his achievements tend to correlate highly with each other,[3] being successful in some sports contest is not a necessary condition for achieving a lot in that contest and being very successful in some sports contest is not a sufficient condition for achieving a lot in that contest.

Consider a professional heavyweight boxer called Jackson who fights against another professional heavyweight boxer called Stevenson. Stevenson is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world and he has won each of his 40 professional fights by knockout, technical knockout or unanimous decision.[4] Many of his professional fights have been against very good opponents and he has even beaten some boxing legends. Stevenson has decided before his fight against Jackson that it will be the last fight of his professional career and he in fact never fights again after his fight against Jackson. The result of the fight is that Stevenson wins once again. However, Stevenson wins only by split decision.[5] More specifically, the score is 115-113, 115-113 and 113-115. However, the overwhelming majority of boxing experts score the fight for Jackson and many of them by a wide margin, whereas

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[3] For example, winning an Olympic gold medal in the 10,000 metres by breaking the world record and becoming the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world in professional boxing after having completely dominated an extremely good opponent not only are huge successes but are also huge achievements.

[4] In professional boxing a unanimous win means that all three judges score the fight for the same boxer.

[5] In professional boxing a split win means that two of the judges score the fight for the same boxer, whereas one of the judges scores the fight for the other boxer.

very few boxing experts score the fight a draw and even fewer score it for Stevenson. Thus the overwhelming majority of boxing experts think that Jackson would have deserved to win the fight.

It seems to me that the fight was not a success for Jackson because he lost. However, it also seems to me that Jackson achieved a lot in the fight. Of course, if Jackson had won, he would have achieved much more, namely a fantastic victory and several world heavyweight championship belts. But I think it was a big achievement by Jackson that the overwhelming majority of boxing experts scored the fight for him. Moreover, although Jackson was not successful in the fight, he was not as unsuccessful in it as he would have been if he had lost the fight by knockout, technical knockout or unanimous decision, as losing by knockout, technical knockout or unanimous decision would have been an even worse result for him than losing by split decision. In fact Jackson was less unsuccessful in his fight against Stevenson than anyone else against Stevenson in Stevenson's professional career, because Jackson lost only by split decision unlike anyone else against Stevenson in Stevenson's professional career. I believe that this counts as an achievement by Jackson.

Consider next the following real life example. Steven Bradbury won the gold medal in the men's 1,000 metres in short track speed skating at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. However, he had a huge amount of luck from the quarter-finals onwards. In the quarter-finals the top two finishers from each heat would qualify for the semi-finals. At the final corner of the last lap it looked like that Bradbury would finish fourth in his quarter-final heat. However, he ended up being second in his heat, because one of the other skaters did not manage to cross the finish line before Bradbury due to being obstructed by another skater and because the obstructor was disqualified.[6] In the semi-finals the top two finishers from each heat would qualify for the final. In his semi-final heat Bradbury was off the pace of all the other skaters. However, three of the other four competitors fell down in the last lap and two of them at the final corner. This allowed Bradbury to qualify for the final.[7] In the final Bradbury was well behind the other skaters at the final corner of the last lap. However, all the other four competitors fell down. This allowed Bradbury to win the Olympic gold medal.

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[6] The skater who was obstructed also advanced to the semi-finals.

[7] The skater who finished third also advanced to the final because he was obstructed by one of the other skaters.

It seems to me that winning the Olympic gold medal in the men's short track 1,000 metres event is always a very big success. But it also seems to me that winning it in the way Bradbury did is not a very big achievement or even a big achievement.

On the basis of these examples, it can be concluded that being successful in some sports contest is not a necessary condition for achieving a lot in that contest and that being very successful in some sports contest is not a sufficient condition for achieving a lot in that contest. It also seems to me that although an athlete cannot be "too lucky" in order to be very successful in some sports contest (i.e. having a lot of luck in a sports contest never affects negatively one's success in it), one can be so lucky in a sports contest that it is incompatible with him achieving a lot in that contest.

3. Achievements and Goodness

I think the examples in the previous chapter also indicate that the goodness of an athlete has a stronger correlation with the magnitude of his achievements than with his successfulness. The boxer (i.e. Jackson) who was not successful in the fight, but who nevertheless achieved a lot in it, probably fought very *well* in it. In other words, he was probably very *good* in the fight. And Bradbury, who was very successful in the men's short track 1,000 metres event in Salt Lake City, but whose victory in it was much smaller as an achievement than as a success, did not perform particularly well in that event.

But what is the right theoretical basis for evaluating the goodness of an athlete? It seems to me clear that goodness in sports is about *athletic excellence*. More specifically, I believe that goodness in sports is about athletic excellence *on an absolute scale*. Thus I believe that being a better athlete than someone else in some sports contest or some other time period (e.g. in some specific year or one's whole career) is about showing more athletic excellence in that contest or time period on an absolute scale. It could be argued that the goodness of an athlete in some sports contest or some other time period is determined by how much athletic excellence he showed or has shown in that contest or time period *relative to the development stage of his sport* rather than how much athletic excellence he showed or has shown in that contest or time period on an absolute scale. However, I believe that how much athletic excellence an athlete showed or has shown relative to the development stage of his

sport is connected to the magnitude of his achievements (i.e. his greatness) rather than how good he was or is.

The development stage of an athlete's sport should be taken into account when the magnitude of his achievements is evaluated. For example, in the 1920's and 1930's there was much less knowledge and understanding about many things that are important regarding improving one's performance in swimming, running and long jump (e.g. technique, training methods and diet) than there is nowadays. Because of this, to the best of my understanding, it simply would not have been possible for anyone in the 1920's and 1930's to swim or run as fast as the best swimmers and runners do nowadays, or jump as far as the best long jumpers do nowadays, not even with the same kind of equipment (e.g. swimsuits and shoes) that top swimmers, runners and long jumpers nowadays use in contests or on the same kinds of tracks that are nowadays used in athletics. In other words, it would not have been possible for any swimmer, runner or long jumper in those decades to show as much athletic excellence on an absolute scale as the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers show nowadays. Surely this is something that we should take into account when we evaluate the magnitude of Johnny Weissmuller's and Jesse Owens's achievements. We should take into account that they showed very much athletic excellence relative to the development stages of their sports. So for example, although by jumping 8.13 metres in long jump in 1935 Owens[8] showed less athletic excellence on an absolute scale (even if we take into account, as I think we should, considerations regarding different kinds of equipment and track surfaces) than someone would show by jumping 8.63 metres in equally good weather and altitude conditions in the 2010's, Owens showed more athletic excellence relative to the development stage of long jump. Thus Owens's jump was arguably a bigger achievement than the jump of our imaginary long jumper would be.

It may be thought that if my view about how to evaluate the goodness of an athlete is plausible, it follows that in the 1920's and 1930's there were not any extremely good swimmers, runners and long jumpers, as the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers in those decades showed much less athletic excellence on an absolute scale than the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers have shown and will show in the 2010's. On the other hand, it may also be argued that if my view about how to evaluate the goodness of an athlete

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[8] By doing that, Owens set the new world record.

is plausible, it follows that there have perhaps *never* been extremely good swimmers, runners and long jumpers, as it may be the case that so far no one has shown even nearly as much athletic excellence on an absolute scale in swimming, running or long jump as the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers will show at some point in the future, for example in the 2090's.[9]

It clearly follows from my view about how to evaluate the goodness of an athlete that the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers in the 1920's and 1930's were much worse swimmers, runners and long jumpers than the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers in the 2010's. It also follows from my view that if so far no one has shown even nearly as much athletic excellence on an absolute scale in swimming, running or long jump as the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers will show in the 2090's, then every swimmer, runner and long jumper who has so far existed is or was a much worse swimmer, runner or long jumper than the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers will be in the 2090's. However, I do not believe that my view about how to evaluate the goodness of an athlete could imply that there have never been extremely good swimmers, runners and long jumpers. Whether some particular athlete is or was good enough an athlete to qualify as an extremely good athlete depends on the point of view we take. From the point of view of what swimming and athletics were in the 1920's and 1930's, Johnny Weissmuller and Jesse Owens were extremely good athletes, whereas from the point of view of what swimming and athletics are in the 2010's, arguably neither of them was good enough an athlete to qualify as an extremely good athlete. Thus rather than being invariant, the standards of "extremely good" vary depending on the point of view we take. Consequently extremely good swimmers, runners and long jumpers exist nowadays and have existed in the past, even if no swimmer, runner and long jumper who has existed so far is or was even close to as good as the best swimmers, runners and long jumpers will be in the 2090's.

4. Two Accounts of Achievements

Duncan Pritchard (2010, 23) has given an account of achievements according to which

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[9] See also Moore (2007, 93) who writes that "judged on an absolute scale of the sum total of all medical theory possible, there are no good doctors and never have been…Think of how doctors of the future will regard present-day doctors. They will be like Bones, from Star Trek, 'those primitives— always barbarically cutting and hurting their patients.'"

An achievement is a success that is either: (i) because of the exercise, to a particularly significant level, of one's relevant abilities; or which is (ii) because of the exercise of one's relevant abilities (rather than due to some factor external to one's agency, such as luck) and which involves the overcoming of a significant obstacle to that success.

Let's have a look at what Pritchard writes about the success condition and conditions (i) and (ii). Pritchard (2010, 19-20) writes about the success condition in the following way:

an essential ingredient of achievements is that they involve *success*. Failure may be glorious, but it does not involve an achievement. This point is easy to miss, since the most glorious failures often do involve *related* achievements. For example, that you came second in a 100 metre sprint means that you cannot exhibit the achievement of being the race winner. But that doesn't mean that you don't thereby exhibit any number of related achievements. Perhaps, say, you have overcome a significant injury in order to race this day. If so, then that you came second may well constitute an achievement on your part. Or perhaps you recorded your personal best time in this race. If so, then this would also be an achievement on your part. The point remains, however, that you cannot exhibit the achievement of *winning the race* if you fail to win the race.

Related to (i), Pritchard (2010, 23-24) writes that

[Not] all achievements are difficult. After all, when Tiger Woods sinks a put with ease, or when Rafael Nadal hits a winning shot with no trouble at all, we would certainly regard the successes in question as achievements, even though they are, for them at any rate, easy successes…while the respective achievements are easy for them, they are only easy because of the exercise of such a great level of skill in attaining this achievement. Thus, these successes qualify as achievements because they satisfy the first condition of this account of achievement.

Related to (ii), Pritchard (2010, 24) writes that

In contrast, in cases where no great skill is on display then the overcoming of a significant obstacle to success is vital if it is to count as an achievement. In order to see this, notice that while simply raising one's arm (in normal circumstances) does not qualify as an achievement, it could qualify as an achievement if there were some significant obstacle to this success. If, for example, one had hurt one's arm in a car accident, such that one had considerable difficulty raising it, then raising it *could* constitute an achievement. In the former case, the easy success does not count as an achievement since there is neither a significant level of skill on display nor the overcoming of a significant obstacle which stands in the way of one's success. In the latter case, however, the success in question could constitute an achievement because there is a significant obstacle to that success. The agent would thus satisfy the second condition of this account of achievement.

I would like to note two things about these passages. First, it should be noticed that what Pritchard writes about successes and the interrelationship of successes and achievements is

not incompatible with what I have so far said about them in this article. Pritchard refers with the word "success" to "succeeding in doing something", whereas I use the word "success" and expressions like "a very big success" and "a huge success" to refer to whether some sports contest was a success for some athlete in terms of its *official result* or how big of a success some sports contest was for some athlete in terms of its official result.

Secondly, for a person who is interested in comparing athletes to each other, such an account of achievements that can be used for determining *how much* some athlete achieved or has achieved in some sports contest or some other time period is more useful than Pritchard's account of achievements that is concerned with the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as an achievement. Thus I now give such an account. I suggest that how much some athlete achieved in some sports contest depends on (i) whether the athlete was successful or unsuccessful in the contest (in terms of its official result) and how successful or unsuccessful he was; (ii) how much the official result of the contest was due to the athlete's athletic excellence and how much it was due to something else (e.g. luck or cheating); (iii) how much athletic excellence the athlete showed in the contest relative to the development stage of his sport; (iv) how much athletic excellence the athlete showed in the contest compared to other athletes in that contest; (v) experts' views about the athlete's performance in the contest (especially if it is controversial who showed most athletic excellence in that contest which is often the case in professional boxing and certain other sports); and (vi) what kinds of obstacles (e.g. what kinds of opponents and injuries) the athlete had in or before the contest. I believe that this account of achievements could serve sports enthusiasts well and much better than Pritchard's account of achievements.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have provided some theoretical basis for evaluating the successfulness of an athlete, the goodness of an athlete and the magnitude of an athlete's achievements as well as for understanding their interrelationships. I also hope that I have shown that there are many philosophically interesting and complex questions related to achievements, success and goodness in sports and that consequently various votings and polls about athletes that are connected to achievements, success and goodness are philosophically far from uninteresting.

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