

Philosophy *Through* Sports

PHIL 24A [2 units]

Stanford University, Spring Quarter 2023

Wednesdays, 1:30-2:20pm, Room 200-230

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2:30-3:30pm, Room 100-101E

Link to [Canvas Page](#)

Instructors:

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Overview:

In 1983, the Raiders won the Super Bowl and Marcus Allen was the MVP. Marcus Allen no longer plays for the Raiders and neither do any of his teammates. The Raiders have since moved from Los Angeles to Oakland to Las Vegas and ownership has passed from Al Davis to Mark Davis. Despite this, they're still the Raiders and they're still, in some sense, the same team as the 1983 Super Bowl champions. In a similar vein, the Washington Commanders claim a 90-year history, despite having recently changed their name and jersey. In what sense can we say these teams are the *same* throughout their history?

In this course, we will think about philosophy *through* sports: we will explore classic philosophical problems – like the one above and others concerning rules, responsibility, and so on – as they arise in the context of sports. Rather than investigating the nature or ethics of sport, we will untangle abstract puzzles of philosophy using our familiarity or experience with individual sports, team sports, and games. Whether you are a just casual fan or you view the world through the lens of your favorite sport, this course will encourage you to explore the field of philosophy using knowledge you already have. Not only will you be introduced to key topics and tools in philosophy, but you will also be invited to engage with sports in a new way. No previous experience in philosophy is necessary to be successful in this course, but all levels are welcome! [If you're interested in learning about philosophy, but sports just aren't for you, we recommend checking out PHIL 1 or PHIL 2 instead.]

Course Learning Objectives:

The core learning objective for this course will be to marshal your experience and intuitions about sports and games as a means to analyze and scrutinize classic, though complex, philosophical puzzles.

Through active engagement and completion of course requirements, you will additionally be able to:

- Grasp the general landscape of core areas in contemporary philosophy
- Read and extract central arguments from difficult philosophical texts
- Ask philosophically substantive questions about sports and games
- Apply a growing set of philosophical concepts and resources to the analysis of new puzzles
- Know about the ins and outs of unfamiliar games and sports through peer discussion
- Deepen your interest in sports and games by viewing them through an entirely new lens
- Discover new sources of exciting curiosity in your everyday life

Course Materials:

All course readings will be posted to the course website on Canvas. You do not need to purchase any materials.

Coursework and Evaluation:

In Class: Attendance (20%) and Participation (30%)

The success of this course importantly depends on the presence and preparedness of its members. *Attendance* will be graded on a Credit/No Credit, week-by-week basis.

However, in order to **pass this class**, you cannot miss more than **two** course meetings, except in extenuating circumstances or with permission given by an instructor. If you are a college athlete with an expected travel schedule this quarter, please communicate your tentative travel schedule in advance with your instructor.

Participation will be evaluated holistically. Attendance credit does not guarantee participation credit. We expect course members to complete all readings in advance and come to class ready to discuss. We ask for thoughtful and community-building contributions both in the large group and small group setting. You will frequently be asked to reflect on personal experiences, share them with your peers, and work together to synthesize new perspectives. Finally, active listening and open-mindedness are just as important as being a speaking contributor.

Out of Class: Writing Assignment 1 (20%) and Writing Assignment 2 (30%)

This course will require two short writing assignments, both centered around the development of your ability to articulate philosophical puzzles. The *first assignment* will be a midterm assignment due Week Six. You will be asked to complete a 500-word writeup of a class discussion, including a brief outline of the assigned reading and an elaboration of how the paper connects to a topic in sports. The *second assignment* will be

a 1000-word writeup of a philosophical problem due Finals Week. The format of this assignment will be the same as the first, though the philosophical puzzle will not be one from class, but instead one that is new (options for puzzles will be circulated during Week Eight).

Course Readings:

The required readings for each week will include one philosophy paper and one piece of sports-journalism. We've kept the readings light (on average 18 pages of philosophy per week) so we expect you to have read both articles for the week before we discuss it in class. Additionally, each Sunday evening, in anticipation of that week's meeting, we will be sharing a "Primer Question" on Canvas to further orient your engagement with the materials.

Week 1: Introductions (To each other and to the course!)

No Reading!

Week 2: Is the umpire always right? The Euthyphro Dilemma and Official Judgments

Philosophy: Plato, *Euthyphro* (16p)

Sports: L.A. Times Archives, "On Close Calls"

Optional Sports: Makowsky, "Rules versus Discretion in Soccer"; Wasserman, "Policing Sports: Basketball Referees are Lawless, and Soccer Referees are Lawful"

Week 3: What are the rules? Kripkenstein and Rules

Philosophy: Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (p.7-21) (15p)

Sports: Dinjaski, "When 'Bending The Rules' Led To The Rule Book Changing"

Optional Sports: SB, "Wilt Chamberlain Dunked From the Free-Throw Line and Terrified Rule-Makers" (video); MLB, "Randle Blows Ball Foul" (video)

Week 4: Not Your Grandma's Football Team: Identity and Persistence of Teams

Philosophy: Chisolm, Excerpts from "Identity Through Time" (3p)

Sports: Choose at least one of following to read- i) Stirgus, "Braves Have Another Claim to Fame"; ii) Crowe, "Minneapolis Sportswriter Helped Raise the Lakers"

Week 5: There's no "I" in "Team": Team Sports and Group Responsibility

Philosophy: List, "Group Responsibility" (25p)

Sports: Choose at least one of following to read- i) Sherman, "How Much is LeBron James to Blame for the Failures of His Supporting Cast?"; ii) Peterson, "Shaw responds to Critics in wake of USC loss"

Assignment 1 Prompts will be released Monday, May 1st

Week 6: When to Clear the Benches? Just War Theory and Playing Dirty

Philosophy: Lazar, “Killing Civilians Is Worse Than Killing Soldiers” (22p)

Sports: Choose at least one of following to read- i) Regan, “Explaining the Unwritten Rules and Etiquette of Hockey Fights”; ii) Briggs, “Rules Are Meant to Be Broken: The Smartest Fouls In Sports”

Assignment 1 due Friday, May 12th

Week 7: Ferrari Wins F1, Does Nike Deserve a Medal? Equipment and Accomplishment

Philosophy: Clark and Chalmers, “The Extended Mind” (13p)

Sports: Choose at least one of following to read- i) Rosenthal, “Inside the high-tech hitting lab...”; ii) Wikipedia’s “The Mechanics of Oscar Pistorius’s Running Blades”

Week 8: Eyeglasses and Exoskeletons: Unfair Advantages

Philosophy: Christiano, “Equality, Fairness, and Agreements” (21p)

Sports: Adelson, “Let ‘em Play”

Assignment 2 Prompts will be released Wednesday, May 24th

Week 9: Can Bad Players Be Good Coaches? Knowing How and Knowing That

Philosophy: Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That” (16p)

Sports: Choose at least one of following to read- i) Crizer, “Expertise v. experience? MLB’s latest revolution is changing the face of coaching; ii) Stavenhagen, “Robin Lund’s unusual route from college professor to Tiger’s pitching coach”

Week 10: Is Philosophy a Game? Final Reflections

Philosophy: Dennett, “Higher-order Truths about Chess” (3p)

Sports: NHK, “The 82 Techniques of Sumo” (video)

Assignment 2 due Thursday, June 15th

Learning and Student Resources:

For this course, we especially recommend:

- [Academic coaches](#) from the Center for Teaching and Learning, to help you manage your time and work effectively
- [Study halls](#), organized by the Center for Teaching and Learning, to work and learn in quiet companionship with other students
- [Tutoring for Student Athletes](#), AARC

Other campus resources include:

- [Study Tips and Tools](#), from the Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Writing tutors](#) from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking, to sharpen your essay-writing skills
- [Undergraduate Advising Directors](#), Academic Advising
- [Well-Being services](#), including [well-being coaches](#), Vaden Health Center
- [Subject Matter Tutoring](#), Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Language Conversation Partner Program](#), Center for Teaching and Learning
- [English as a Second Language \(ESL\) courses](#) for international graduate students

Course Policies:

Honor code:

Class meetings and sections in this course will be highly interactive, you will hear plenty of great ideas from your peers, and if things go as planned, you might even *change your mind* based on what others say! However, you will be evaluated in this course as an individual and are expected to cite sources and individuals from whom you have learned and borrowed as a display of academic, intellectual, and creative integrity. Failure to do so is a violation of Stanford's Honor Code and is a serious offense, even when the violation is unintentional. Conduct prohibited by the Honor Code includes all forms of academic dishonesty, among them unpermitted collaboration and representing others' work as one's own. Please review [Stanford's Honor Code](#), [these recommendations](#) from the Office of Community Standards, and [documentation and citation resources](#) from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking. When in doubt, contact your instructor.

The Stanford Honor Code was composed by students in 1921 and expresses the university's expectations for academic integrity. Together with the Fundamental Standard, these documents lay out the rights and responsibilities of Stanford students, in particular with regard to their academic behavior. Some key points:

- Students cannot submit the same written work for different classes.
- Plagiarism is prohibited (this includes uncited use of generative AI tools).
- Having someone else complete an assignment for you is prohibited.

Students with Documented Disabilities:

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community. We welcome you to our class.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit oae.stanford.edu.

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, we invite you to share your letter with us. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so we may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.