

Nietzsche's Collective "Will to Power" and the Coaching Style of Phil Jackson

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What does Nietzsche mean when he vacillates between the terms "I" and "we" throughout his writings? How might this apply to the philosophy of sports? Many coaches tell their players that there is no "I" in team and the cliché is intended to teach players to lose their egos in order to serve the interests of the team. For many readers of Nietzsche, one might respond by saying, "But, there is an I in will to power." This is true, except there is also "We" and it is obvious upon further inspection that will to power serves as both "I" and "We". For example, the preface to *Genealogy of Morality*: "We are unknown to ourselves, *we* men of knowledge - and for good reason. *We* have never sought ourselves." This way that Nietzsche beckons "we," especially in this context, can bear affinity with Jnana Yoga, the spiritual practice of self-knowledge, but in this case on a group level that maximizes the performance of the body through building sound-minded, self-mastery practices.

At the earliest phases of Western thought, Michel Foucault outlines¹ that there were two main poles of self-knowledge: *gymnasia* ("to train oneself") and *meditatio* ("an imaginary experience that trains thought"). *Gymnasia* is a training of the body for a real situation, and in Plutarch's *On the Daemon of Socrates*, one gives oneself over to very hard sporting activities and one places oneself in front of tantalizing foods only to then renounce them. Socrates as the wrestler and philosophical competitor congealed in the mind of Nietzsche an image of the philosopher as an athletic competition, rather than merely '*meditatio*'-discursive argumentation through the testing of validity or invalidity of logos (a speech act that articulates truth through language). There is no '*meditatio*' without also '*gymnasia*' hence, a philosophy of sport is fundamental to understanding the self-mastery of the body because mind and body are not dualistically separate, but inextricably connected. *Meditatio*, if it is contained within the realm of the mind and logos must be understood as immanently produced within the body and its impulses, instinctual drives, and primitive forms of affect which can be "trained" and directed through gymnastic athletic competition.

Nietzsche says throughout his work that Will to power is pathos rather than logos. Nietzsche is crystal clear on this point throughout his work. To reduce philosophy to propositions is to miss the corporeal aspects of training oneself. *Gymnasia* is not about domesticating pathos, or repressing pathos, rather it is about bringing the "we" within the self into "one" even if that one is a complete illusion.

Sports are the perfect terrain to truly gain a sense of Nietzschean will to power. Defeating an elite adversary means that a higher version of yourself and your team must emerge. Nietzsche knew that healthy competition was the pinnacle of philosophical pursuit and he describes philosophy as finding good fencing partners. Those who are successful in sport possess the will

¹ Michel Foucault. *Technologies of the Self*. Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Pg. 240-41.

to power. Nietzsche describes his Übermensch Zarathustra summoning the courage to overcome the inner-cowardice of the 'inner-dwarf' which is the voice inside of everyone that raises doubts and uncertainty. An athlete who must step up in the big game and make a clutch play has to train the mind to overcome those self-doubts to perform under pressure when the game is on the line. Many players cannot handle the pressure and fold. As Nietzsche knew all too well, the work of philosophy is the work of the body in action. Competition can be a life enhancing enterprise that pushes consciousness to higher levels. By defeating an elite adversary a higher version of yourself must emerge.

A confrontation between Zarathustra and the dwarf in *On the Vision and the Riddle* makes this inner-conflict apparent, "Courage finally bade me to stand still and speak: "Dwarf! It is you or I" - courage is the best slayer, courage which attacks; for in every attack there is playing and brass." (Z, On Vision and Riddle) and his understanding that the goal of society is to create "a choice type of being, able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being." (BGE § 258) It is also crucial to understand that good competition can elevate the skills of everyone involved, but a point that is often missed when discussing Nietzsche is that in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he makes a very clear distinction between competition and hunting.

Hunting for souls, or the destruction of embodied form,² and the fight to the death as the realm of religion and its psychologists of the soul who: "would like to have hundreds of hunting assistants, and fine trained hounds, that he could send into the history of the human soul, to drive his game together." (BGE § 45). Clearly, is making categorical distinctions between competition, playing, and hunting. Hunting with the intention of flattening and dominating the opponent is akin to earlier medieval forms of sport

² I think Nietzsche has in mind the idea of the body and soul as described in the Phaedo. Where the philosopher is a despiser of the body who wants to free the soul from association with the body as much as possible.

which I will outline in a moment. It is crucial to clearly show that Nietzsche makes a distinction between hunting something to kill it and the agonistic spirit of athletic competition where adversaries live to play another round. This newer, agonist spirit of sports was only just emerging in the late 1800's. Agonism must be distinguished from taking lives and the process of hunting for souls which is akin to what Nietzsche defines as religion, and the latter category of hunting for souls was akin to the function of sports in the medieval era under the hegemony of Catholic power. In the modern era, sports would not take this life or death connotation and Nietzsche sees this process emerging as a 'kinder gentler' understanding of sports emerged in the modern era. Players in medieval "camp ball" games would be unconcerned about inflicting fatal attacks on the enemy in the way that contemporary concerns over concussions have been a recent cause of concern for the contemporary National Football League.

Hence, when Nietzsche says, "the spiritual flattening of a people is a compensation namely for the spiritual deepening of another people" (BGE, § 241) this indicates a way that the Übermensch's coach must inspire the agonistic, playful, and competitive "flattening" of the opponent, not by being caught up in the opponent's game, but through the spiritual deepening of his players. Most coaches make the mistake of leading from the outside-in, rather than from the inside-out.³ What the exceptional coach does with the "we-Übermensch"-team is allow for the exertion of energy in his teams to be most efficient, by "benching the ego," and "letting every player discover their own role,"⁴ effectively utilizing energy through passing, getting other involved in his famous 'triangle offense' and in doing so, his players moved

³ Phil Jackson. *Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success*. Penguin: New York, pg.11.

⁴ *ibid.*

“effortlessly and without a second-thought, there was no doubt, it was as reflex, no mind, and of one mind” (Jackson’s words) and yet, the other team is confused, working much harder to keep up, and by the end exhausted, i.e. energetically ‘flattened’ - this is the winning technique that Phil Jackson’s coaching style perfected. The players give everything to the game.

Sports in the late 1800’s

The word sport most likely derives from the Latin word *desporto*, meaning “to carry away.” As some scholars have researched, early sports were a way of settling conflicts between communities, settling debts, resolving juridical disputes, and in victory the winning side might carry away the other team. Sometimes a juridical aspect existed in the form of absolving a debt, or enacting a catharsis, and other times sports enabled pure entertainment out of sheer boredom. Yet, the rules to the games are much more clearly delineated. As you go further back into history the line between ‘hunting and competing’ is far less obvious, and so lines from Nietzsche may have indicated an opinion on what would then fall into the category of “sports” but today might seem absurd to think of in those terms, such as the section three in *Beyond Good and Evil* “The Religious Nature” where he characterizes the psychologist as the lover of the “big game hunt” who seeks after souls. (BGE § 45)

Sports might have taken on a totally different trajectory had not the commercialization of all aspects of life swept through the modern era. There are three sections from *Dawn* that stand out as the middle period of Nietzsche’s thought give us insight into his trepidation over §173 - *Eulogizers of work*, §174 - *Moral Fashion of a Commercial Society*, and § 175 - *The Fundamental Idea of a Culture of Commercial Beings*. All of these clearly show criticism that Nietzsche explicitly articulated pointed attacks against the encroachment of

the modernist unreflective ethos of ‘work’ over ‘play,’ and these can shape our understanding of his views of what went completely wrong with the current status of sports in modern life. He is not just talking about playing sports within the defined rules, but creating new forms of sport, and discovering creative ways of utilizing sports as a way of creative self-mastery.

Gymnasia, or what Vedic philosophy calls *Jnana yoga*, as fundamental to the process of self-mastery. Sports becoming big business, takes the enjoyment out of the game and Nietzsche notices this, not in the context of sports per se, but all areas of modern life becoming subsumed under the efficient stupidity of the marketplace, as Nietzsche makes clear in those sections. It is a problem because it extinguishes free laziness and free play where one might “laze about and be idiotic and childish to one’s heart’s content.” (D, § 179) - if you look back at the context where the most popular modern sports were invented in the West these sports were all created in leisurely contexts.

Up until the late 19th century there was no business of sports in the way it exists today. Many of the ideas about sports were unformed because the great titans of the twentieth century, the *Übermensches* of Babe Ruth, Muhammed Ali, and Michael Jordan among others, had not yet cast their colossal shadow over our normative conceptions of what sport ought to be. A cottage industry of sports ethics and philosophy of sport has emerged a-posteriori in the modern era. It is crucial to keep in mind that for Nietzsche none of this had occurred yet, and his only reference points were the Greeks of antiquity, and the sports that existed at that time. Anything else was conjecture of the imagination. The major sports were boxing, cricket, horse-racing, and baseball, which had not yet obtained its status in the American nostalgia machine as its treasured “National Pastime.”

In Nietzsche’s day, sports were still widely considered hobbies and club activities among the wealthier classes for fun. The National Association of Professional Baseball Players had only formed in 1871, and Dr. James Naismith, who held a doctorate in divinity, would not raise his famous peach

baskets in the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA until 1891.⁵ It is interesting that if you look back into the history of professional basketball, for example, the game was invented by someone with an advanced education and most of the earliest coaches were people with a high level of education in fields unrelated to sports. Since there was no “Egyptianized”⁶ history within basketball at the time which would tell people what the patterns of success “ought” to be, sports were typically understood to be opportunities to teach teenagers and young adults about moral virtues through the process of play. It was not yet merely corporate team-building exercises, per se, but team building exercises that taught the innate value of team would eventually lead to success and winning, and not the inverse that we see today.

There is no better quotation in all of Nietzsche’s oeuvre that better describes the trajectory of modern life, and by extension modern sports than *Dawn* §175, the fundamental idea of a culture of commercial beings, in which we see the prophecy that the twentieth century will bring with it a society where commerce is just as much in the soul as competition was for the Greeks, and war, law, and victory was for the Romans. Value is now assessed, not according to individual personal need, but according to commerce.⁷

5 Naismith, James. “James Naismith, Rare 1939 Radio Interview.” YouTube, uploaded 15 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yxk6pb64F8> - explains how he invented basketball and the original rules. Again proving my point that what begins as “contingency is retroactively understood as necessary” a recent publication where I go into further detail can be found: “What About Life? What Starts as Contingency is Retroactively Understood as Necessary” <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/1154>

6 By this I mean of course the Nietzschean sense of a “mummified” history, preserved, revered, reified, and thereby, completely limiting to new innovations in the field.

7 The recent airing of the documentary *The Last Dance* is so prescient on this point, in that the commercialization of professional basketball occurred during the 1980’s and 90’s and that process was all a contingency, much like the grandeur of Michael Jordan, Phil Jackson, and the great legends of that era. There was no guarantee that any of that had to happen and there were numerous interviews conducted by the leadership of the Chicago

Nietzsche’s philosophy lends itself well to a philosophy of sport, because it gives us a return to “beginner’s mind” - a clean slate view on sports, back when their existence was merely a contingency, and prior to the way people relate to sports now, as if “sport” is to be approached as a reified-object without realizing it as such.

Nietzsche’s “I” and “We”: What is a collective ‘Will to Power’

One of many reasons is Nietzsche’s nuanced way of vacillating from beckoning his readers using “I” and “we.” Who is this we? Is he calling his readers? Those who find sympathy with his arguments, i.e. his ‘team’ in the fencing match that is philosophy? It also leads me to believe that many people have correctly started to assert that the ‘will to power’ can be understood in a plural sense, rather than as an isolated atomized individualized sense. In describing the “we”-will to power, it is by no means a nebulous, undifferentiated herd-experience. A ‘primal force of affects’ is put into practice through the practice of competitive sports—an agonism rather than the violent antagonism of war, that elevates the skill level in each competitor. The point of philosophy is not to produce dialectically efficient “sick hermits” (*BGE*, § 5), but finding worthy fencing partners.

Bulls organization at that time that showed they sort of lucked into that situation and that Jordan’s work ethic, staying away from drugs and alcohol, made for a one-dimensional laser like focus necessary for him to surpass other competitors of his era. In hindsight it may seem like it was totally obvious at the time that Jordan was destined for greatness, but he was only a young man at the time when he entered the league and you can see a sort of youthful uncertainty about him that would only blossom later into the full mystique of what he would become later on, at that time, there were no guarantees, and he had to ‘earn his stripes’ as he said, through his actions not his voice, because as a rookie he had not yet earned the right to a voice as a leader.

It is crucial to remember that perhaps Nietzsche was positioning the “will to power” as tearing free from the eternal recurrence. Will to power truly became the central concern of Nietzsche’s philosophy in 1888. His final productive year. Subsequently, “the will to power is not a being not a becoming, but a pathos.” (WP, §635) a quotation he writes immediately after writing as follows: “We need ‘unities’ in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist.”⁸

The will to power is a decentralization of ontology that springs forth from one point or term, from which differences are unfolded and recoiled back into itself as it seeks its most primordial possibilities of disclosure.⁹ Nietzsche then emphasizes the plurality of affects working upon the body by saying, “The will to overcome an affect is ultimately only the will of another, or of several other, affects.” (BGE, §117).

A decentralized will that can break out of the routinization of the being of beings: “If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended final state, this also must have been reached...the fact of “spirit” as a form of becoming proves that the world has no goal, no final state, and is incapable of being.” (WP, §1062).

⁸ I am not the first to put forth this thesis. For a similar perspective on will to power see “Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power’: Politics Beyond (Hegelian) Recognition” by John H. Smith. *New German Critique*, no. 73. Winter 1998. Pg. 133-163. Smith claims, and I agree with his thesis, as follows: “Nietzsche redefines the terms of politics, since the will to power is not an individualized, self-identical entity modeled on a self-consciousness that engages in struggles with some other likewise self-contained individuals, but rather an internally self-differentiating force always experiencing affective interactions...” (pg. 133). This theme of necessary illusions stretches at least as far back in the Nietzschean oeuvre as *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense*. One can read Nietzsche’s writings as investigating the immanence of ‘necessary illusions’; as he matures as a philosopher, he moves further inward, interrogating the immanence of power as inscribed within the psyche of the subject.

⁹ Probably the best book to not do this is Pierre Klossowski’s *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. 1997. London: The Athlone Press.

Continuing with this theme, it is not unusual that when you find Nietzsche describing the will to power you also see him utilizing the plural sense of “we” and then a critique of a substantialized sense of the self, rather than a citadel of the self in the form of an identifiable “I” commanding the commonwealth of the soul, rather as a temporary unification of affects and drives. Prior to action there is not a thought that directs the action towards an idealized end as if the self were pre-directed by ideas, thoughts, and mental ideations. Will to power is about effective force of will, and a great coach would understand this, more than overthinking the X’s and O’s of schemes, tactics, strategies, which leads players to burden themselves with over analysis. Emphasis is placed on practicing solid team-affective training so as to loosen up and play the game at its highest levels. What Nietzsche says is absolutely true. If there is no discernible goal, or final state, then no understanding of being is possible, the telos is a trap if it becomes obsessively overdetermining of the process. If there was a goal, the world would already be there, because time is infinite in either direction, and eternally recurring. Goal and process is key. If there are no values, are you worthy of creating your own?

Consider this passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, which is a very common theme throughout Nietzsche’s later writings when his thorough treatment of will to power began:

“Finally, let’s present the different way in which *we* (I politely say *we*) view the problem of error and illusion... Reason sees actors and actions everywhere: it believes in the will as an absolute cause; it believes in the “I,” in the I as being, in the I as a substance, and projects its belief into the I-substance to all things - that’s how it first creates the concept “thing”... Being is thought into things everywhere as a cause, is imputed to things, from the conception “I” there follows the derivative concept “being”... At the beginning there stands the great and fatal error of thinking that the will is something effective - that will is an ability... Today we know that it is just a word...” (TI, “Reason” § 5)

As Nietzsche is keen to remind us, the slave morality tries to ensnare the strong through pity and compassion and also by teaching the wrong lessons about free will. There might be freedom to choose between this or that act, however, the confusion over free will in the mind of the oppressed is that the ethical thing to do is to take mercy upon the weaker, meek little lambs. It is impossible to imagine athletic competition surviving at all in a world where the Übermensch is conditioned to second-guess the “will to power” as a competitive drive and give mercy to an opponent rather than flatten the adversary in pursuit of victory. To think neurotically, tarrying back and forth indecisively about whether or not to be compassionate is to mistake pity with ethics and this Nietzschean ethos of anti-compassion, anti-pity makes more sense in the context of sports and agonism than in other areas of life.

For example, the bird of prey must be the bird of prey and take nourishment from its prey. In many places, nature is this way because it must be that way, and amor fati is the embracing of these bare facts of life in authenticity, “not to speak of the stupidity of moral indignation, which is the unfailing sign in a philosopher that his philosophical sense of humor has left him...” (BGE, § 25) What is life? “According to nature you want to live?... Living - is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature?” (BGE, § 9) In living there is a transformative aspect to bios and nature. Nature changes as life activates, bios as mobile force activates a transformative effect upon nature, or what appeared once to be a natural stasis is nomadic.

Athletes know this firsthand, without having read Nietzsche, as active-power. Kobe Bryant shooting 2-5,000 jump shots every day in order to perfect his form changes the nature of his body through repetition and experimentation. Michael Jordan going into the weight room after a professional basketball game in order to improve his strength and stamina was activating bios as a mobile force that enabled transformations in his body pushing him above and beyond the levels of corporeal-physis in his competitors. Since we do not yet know what a body can do, “it is perhaps just dawning on five or six

minds that physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and not a world-explanation.” (BGE, § 14) physics as the study of the capabilities of what a superior athlete can do, and how far the body can be pushed must be understood as a series of horizons, interpretations, traversing of thresholds, mobilizing the activation of bios moving beyond, and therefore changing nature, which is never in stasis. “We” are not identical with a hunting bird finding its prey. However, Nietzsche’s philosophy does compel us to think and act under the physical law of nature as vacillating between either active or passive power.

There is a primal drive within the hunting bird to find its prey. If a predator second guesses the instinct to seize its prey, the predator will not eat, and it will eventually die. The bird of prey is limited with the development of its mind which is fortunate for the bird because these limitations make it impossible for the bird to second guess its natural instinct. Humans are not like the bird. We possess logos, and in some ways, this is a curse because we can devise moral systems that tell us to second guess our instinctual reaction to a situation. Superior athletes tend to win or lose on the basis of instinctual reactions that occur at crucial moments in the competition. To second guess an instinct would be akin to negating the talent of the superior athlete/Übermensch.

We are told through Judeo-Christian ethics that humans have freedom and to draw this to its conclusion the strong are free to be weak, and should be like the meek, rather than as the natural form of a bird of prey, to act upon, how they say in professional sports, the “killer instinct” to attack an opponent during the course of a game when the opponent is vulnerable. The meek want to “make the bird of prey responsible for being a bird of prey.” (GM, First Essay, §13)

Great competitors in basketball history, Übermensch like Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant would seize upon injuries in their opponents in order to create an advantage for their team. There is a 'bird of prey' attitude that a superior coach does not 'yoke' or 'harness' in any religious sense of *heilige*. Compassion and pity had no place in the athletic arena, not to try and end the others life, but to win the game. The only sort of compassion allowed, would be through Jnana yoga, the compassion of self-knowledge, to 'know thyself' is to have a tactical advantage.

A theme throughout Nietzsche's work is the decadence of Christian "compassion" seeping into all aspects of life:

Certainly one of the purest revelations of the impulse of culture and especially of the impulse to the ever-renewed production of the saint; but since it has been employed in a hundred ways to propel the mills of state power it has gradually become sick to the very marrow, hypocritical and untruthful, and degenerated into a contradiction of its original goal.¹⁰

The problem, stated throughout all of Nietzsche's writings, is that cultures that accept the virtues of compassion, pity, and humility are in a status of decline for many reasons. One of which is that it weakens the power of the strong who are the driving force behind creative and transformative values. In application to how this would affect a philosophy of sports, it is clear that a thriving society must place a high value upon competition in all areas of life, sports give us exemplary indications of how a society valorizes the performative aspects of those with exceptional abilities, those who are in the game, the political arena, the center-stage of life.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Untimely Meditations*. Schopenhauer as Educator, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, 1983, Cambridge University Press: New York, pg. 166.

Phil Jackson on Coaching an Übermensch

When I teach Nietzsche, I often use Phil Jackson as the exemplary coaching style of the 'will to power' as described by Nietzsche. Phil Jackson utilized eastern philosophy and Lakota philosophy in his coaching methods. Nietzschean themes may be interspersed throughout his writings. Jackson has written several books about his coaching philosophy.¹¹ He coached Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, and Kobe Bryant sometimes pitting rivalries within the team through his knowledge of each player's personality as a way of executing the goal of winning games and maximizing the potential within each player. He claimed that his biggest challenge was how he motivated the team around the star players to develop a competitive spirit among the role players on the team and he knew that each season presented new challenges. There was no such thing as a one size fits all winning template. A great coach would have to adapt along with the team in accordance with creating motivational tactics depending on the needs of the team. These might be constructed as long term goals to set the tone for the month leading into the playoffs, he might start practice with a set of drills to create an atmosphere of amplified seriousness, or in a particularly critical game situation he might intentionally avoid calling a time out to teach the team that they would have to learn resilience in tough situations as a way to avoid panic the next time the game started to slip away. In despair, the coach would not bail out the players, they would have to be their own *deus ex machina* so to speak.

¹¹ Notably, Phil Jackson's *Sacred Hoops*, *Eleven Rings*, *The Last Season*, and in this I will not have time to go into full detail about every aspect of his philosophy while addressing Nietzsche, but this will give you an idea of how successful "I" and "we" concepts can be used to inspire athletes to reach their fullest potential, and more importantly, how the rest of the team can stay involved while the Uber-human is performing at the highest level, and motivate a collective 'will to power' that creates a winning culture.

Jackson fuses philosophical practices into athletic performance in his teams and in return has become one of the winningest coaches in professional basketball history. One of the things from Nietzsche that Phil Jackson tacitly understood was that the will to power was not about a selfish, individual ego forcing power upon a situation, which is based on insecure intentions behind the will. We must avoid personal interpretations of the will to power and remind ourselves that interpreting the will to power as wanting or seeking power is the worst of inane platitudes misappropriated to Nietzsche, by those who have never carefully read his work.

To build confidence that the behaviors of the will consist of confident intentions that will return. This is the difference between a one-trick pony, so to speak, a team that wins once, just once, and is never successful again, and a consistent winning program. What strengthens the bonds of the team is what returns, and what strengthens those bonds is what affirms the innate character of the Übermensch, rather than standing in the way in a battle of wills.

“One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.”

- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue” § 3

How do you coach a player who knows it all? You humble yourself and get out of the way! One gives up control as the coaching occurs. Perhaps nothing describes the philosophy of Phil Jackson’s Zen-inspired Triangle Offense than the line from *Dawn*: “Mastery - mastery has been attained at the point when, in the performance, one neither errs nor hesitates” (D § 537). This occurs because the team must play as active and passive power, acting and reacting to one another. If a player moves to set a screen, the other players must recognize this and act, or react.

Jackson often writes that the Triangle Offense is best understood in the context of what he calls “automatics” where the player with the ball, usually the star player, if there is strong focused defensive pressure placed upon that individual player, “then he can launch into an automatic play to shift the action to another part of the floor and open up new scoring possibilities.”¹² These automatic plays became the Bulls and Lakers favorite plays, because it allowed the players “to adapt to what the defense was doing in a coordinated way, without having to rely on (Jackson) to call plays from the sidelines.”¹³ Phil Jackson even utilizes a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche to describe the effectiveness of team building as an after-effect of implementing these automatic plays: “As Friedrich Nietzsche said: ‘Invisible threads are the strongest ties.’”¹⁴

Championships and the Ring of Rings

“Oh how I should not *lust* for eternity and for the wedding ring of rings, the Ring of Recurrence!”

- TSZ, *The Seven Seals*

“The symbol is the ring.” - Phil Jackson¹⁵

In professional sports, winning championships is the ultimate goal. Doing so will typically garner a championship ring that symbolizes status, power, and acumen. The ring indicates to others that the team has become the Übermensches of the league for that particular season.

¹² Phil Jackson. *Eleven Rings*. Pg. 103.

¹³ *Ibid.* pg. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 103.

¹⁵ Phil Jackson. *Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success*. Penguin Press: New York. Pg. 2.

In Nietzsche's essay *Homer's Contest*, unpublished during his lifetime, has an astute characterization of the process of struggle that occurs through serious athletic competition, of which there is not necessarily ruthless antagonism fueled by naked primal bloodlust, but a channeling of the primal-affective-drives¹⁶ into a competitive will to power. Nietzsche remarks, "thus the Greeks, the most humane men of ancient times, have a trait of cruelty, a tigerish lust to annihilate - a trait that is so very distinct in that grotesquely enlarged mirror image of the Hellenes..." and "the cruelty of victory is the pinnacle of life's jubilation..." while not espousing the virtues of compassion and humanity, Nietzsche does warn about the modern tendency to blunt the passions of these primal drives that would weaken the will, and yet, the successful teams are those where in a relay race, and the same might hold true of any competitive team game, "Every great Hellene hands on the torch of the contest; every great virtue kindles a new greatness."

In healthy agonistic competition, the spirit of competition even compels the losers to get back up and fight again, losing is a learning experience and a matter of bringing back what was lost in the bruised pride of the loser: "when a noted opponent of Pericles is asked whether he or Pericles is the best wrestler in the city, and answers: 'Even when I throw him down, he denies that he fell and attains his purpose, persuading even those who saw him fall.'"¹⁷ "Every talent must unfold itself in fighting."¹⁸ and this unfolding of talents is not separate from the politics of the community, it serves "necessary to preserve the health of the state."¹⁹ With the physics of power in Nietzsche's work, traditional truth appearances are errors that must be overturned for the vitality of a society to remain vibrant. It is not necessarily kinetic energy merely for the sake of pointless motion, one of the worst things that can happen is that a subject loses its object: "Do you call yourself

free? I want to hear your ruling idea and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you such a man as ought to have escaped from a yoke?"²⁰ Nietzsche continues to say in *Homer's Contest* "the noble virtues were those espoused by Hesiod who claimed it was good that "jealousy, hatred, and envy, spur men into activity: not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are contests."²¹

Sports can give a yoke in the form of a rival. In the sense that the state can be strengthened by agonistic competition, there is a point that bears repeating, because from time to time you still hear these things in conferences tagging Nietzsche with the label of fascist sympathizer, and in lines like this, if you only read these quotes out of context and see that one way that the Geist of the political system can stay fresh is by keeping its opponents alive, by turning politics into an agonist sport, not a violent fight to the death: "Almost every party grasps that its own interest, its own self-preservation, depends on the opposing party's not losing its strength; the same applies to politics on the large scale... (which) needs enemies more than it needs friends; only in opposition does it feel that it is necessary, only in opposition does it become necessary..." (TI, "Morality" §3) perhaps Nietzsche had in mind a kind of athletic competition to strengthen the power of the state, as if the body-politics depended upon the kinetic power, and force that it can inflict upon its subjects while propagating life. A point that numerous Nietzscheans within biopolitical discussions have worked through, yet, sports has remained virtually untheorized in these discussions.²²

16 See my "Will to power as Primal-Affective-Forms" in *The Agonist: Nietzsche and the Affects*, Fall 2019/Spring 2020.

17 *Homer's Contest*. Published in the *Portable Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, pg. 36.

18 *Ibid.* pg. 37.

19 *Ibid.* pg. 36.

20 Thus Spoke Zarathustra. "Of the Way of the Creator." pg. 89.

21 *Homer's Contest*. Kaufmann, pg. 35.

22 With one possible exception, Ben Agger's *Body-Problems: Running and Living Long in a Fast Food Society*, 2019, Routledge: New York.

Think about what Nietzsche says here, in competition, even the artist hates the other artists, and in antiquity the noble virtues were those espoused by Hesiod who claimed it was evil to “lead men into hostile fights of annihilation with one another,” while claiming it was good that “jealousy, hatred, and envy, spur²³ men into activity: not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are contests.” It is the competition that spurs the becoming of the ‘Übermensch’ and all areas of life can be viewed as avenues for playful competition.

Jnana Yoga: Team-Being and the “Master/Slave” Morality

In Vedic belief-systems there are four main practices of yoga. Karma, which is the yoga of actions and work. Raja, which is the yoga of exercise and training the body. Bhakti, which is the yoga of love and devotion. Jnana, which is the yoga of self-knowledge and wisdom. The term “jnana” is translated from Sanskrit by some as “deepening self-knowledge.” This seems to be the least utilized yoga in the limited western understanding of “sport” as a life enhancing activity. Practitioners are supposed to keep the mind and body in balance

23 Jacques Derrida’s work *Spurs* is crucial here in that the ‘spur’ is not a marginal concept in Nietzsche’s thought, but the spur is, much like Socrates as the stinging-gadfly of Athens, the provocation that awakens the truth. In athletic competition this would be the exceptional opponent who competes with the übermensch at the highest level and pushes the rivalry to get the best out of the superior athlete. In professional basketball there are these exceptional rivalries from Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, to Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, and even the Detroit Pistons ‘Bad Boys’ of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s getting the best of a very young, not yet fully mature Michael Jordan to defeat him in the NBA Playoffs, seasoning him through the bitter taste of defeat to come back stronger, faster, and with a sharpened sense of determination to beat them next season. One can also see this sense of rivalry rekindled in the NBA in recent years with the Golden State Warriors, led by Phil Jackson’s protege coach Steve Kerr, and the best shooting tandem the “Splash Brothers” Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson facing off against the Cleveland Cavaliers led by LeBron James and his teammates Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love. Interestingly enough on this see Kobe Bryant’s video “Cavalier Kingdom: The Two Crowns” to see him break down how a lesser talented Cavaliers team devised a plan to defeat a record-breaking Golden State Warriors team in the 2016 NBA Finals.

through the disciplined control offered by these four styles of yoga. Over centuries, innumerable forms of each yoga have emerged to help people stay on the path to self-awakening. There must be harmony in these four areas of life which one can attune from within oneself. The exceptional coach will offer spiritual practices that give players the chance to attune themselves so that during the games the pleasure of competing is the gratification itself, winning occurs as a result of the “ananda” (inner-bliss) that one experiences while in the flow of the game.

Coaching the Uber-athletes through a series of purifications, simplifications, and self-examinations, the coach allows self-knowledge to create the team-being as one co-operative entity. Echoing a sentiment found in the Bhagavad-Gita we see one of the earliest descriptions of Jnana Yoga:

“A harmony in eating and resting, in sleeping and keeping awake: a perfection in whatever one does. This is the Yoga that gives peace from all pain. When the mind of the Yogi is in harmony and finds rest in the Spirit within, all restless desires gone... Then, with reason armed with resolution, let the seeker quietly lead the mind into Spirit, and let all his thoughts be silence.” (BG, VI, 17-18, 25)

Simplifying these techniques allows for the single-mindedness of the team to develop, with the crucial ingredient to competitive success is the grounding of restless desires to keep the team focused on the task at hand. In order to do this the coach must allow the competitive seeker (the ‘Übermensch’) to lead the mind of the team into a spirit of winning. Jackson often sounded like Nietzsche in the way he describes his team meetings as less frequently about “X’s and O’s” or technical strategizing, and more about harnessing the team’s inner vision of where they wanted to will themselves to be.

Examples such as these from Nietzsche's writings are too numerous to list. Especially the last portions of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* which are laden with the subtext of Jnana Yoga. Nobody has ever written about this, perhaps Nietzsche did this as an homage to Vedic 'gymnasia/meditatio' as a rebuking of the 'despisers of the body' in the Platonic tradition.

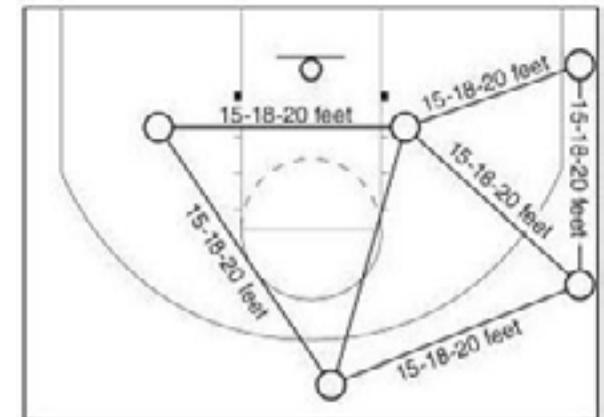
The coach, especially the coach of an "Übermensch"-talent like Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, or Kobe Bryant has the special challenge of melding the various talents of each player into a cohesive "we" and in thinking about what the numerous writers of the Bhagavad-Gita may have had in mind in describing Jnana Yoga in this way we might better understand how Jackson's Triangle Offense became such an effective way to coach numerous Übermensches. Keep in mind that God in the Ancient Vedic scriptures means an inter-connected God.

The famous Ashoka Chakra on the national flag of India is named after King Ashoka, who many believe to be India's greatest spiritual monarch in its history. The Chakra looks like spokes of a wheel with dharma resonating outward from a central hub that connects all, through space between the spokes and the substantive being of the spokes itself:



It contains twenty-four spokes each of which represents the twelve stages of suffering, and the twelve stages of conditional, interdependent arising. Another well-known saying in Taoist thought derives a similar metaphysical point that carries this idea well beyond the terrain of sports into the metaphysics of the cosmos itself: "Many spokes, one wheel, it is the nothingness at the center that turns the wheel." (Tao te Ching, verse 11).²⁴ Compare this with the spacing in Phil Jackson's famous Triangle Offense where players space the floor with enough room to give each player a chance to improvise while working together as a "we".

Players have spots on the floor that the Jackson gets each player to become accustomed to get to, and the player with the ball can improvise, call for screens, players can move without the ball, set screens away from the ball, do backdoor cuts, and as long as players are gravitating back to this a-priori formation the players are allowed to improvise. This flow to the game that is achieved through perfect team harmony actually occurs through *amor fati*, or love of fate. Each player must love themselves to know what talents they were destined to have, and realize



²⁴ Verse 11 of the Tao Te Ching was very influential on Martin Heidegger's "Das Ding" and the understanding of the nothingness surrounding the thing as that which brings forth the thingness of the thing.

that authentically amplifying what is, you can only become more of what you are and there is an acceptance of being comfortable with yourself that allows the team to play at a higher level. When players take on unfamiliar roles the “we” of the will to power falls out of harmony and the team becomes dysfunctional.

He claimed the intention was not to turn players into Buddhist monks but to build more alert awareness of themselves as part of an entire team. In a way, Jackson was balancing passive and active power in a way that was most productive for the team. It is exactly the kind of sedentary Buddhism, the anti-Jnana yoga, that Phil Jackson was trying to avoid, the nefarious docile-body Buddhism that Nietzsche describes: “Brahmin-like self-hypnotizing - Brahmanism as crystal ball and fixed idea - and the final, all-too-comprehensible general disenchantment with its radical cure, nothingness” (GM, bk. 1§6). Sedentary nihilism of the docile body is important from time to time, but it must be punctuated with active power to balance it back out.

If players are standing around watching the “übermensch” putting the team on Jordan, Shaq, or Kobe’s back then the team loses and vice versa. If a lesser talented player forms ego and feels humiliated by lack of playing time and scoring opportunities, then a resentment arises. One can think of the many sayings that Nietzsche produced to describe the imbalances of a “slave-morality” that if applied in his situation can rot the “we” mentality of a winning team: “I do not like him, because I am not equal to him.” (BGE §185), or a call to confidence where Nietzsche says, “As long as you still experience the stars as above you, you lack the eye of knowledge.” (BGE §71), or more potently, the *ressentiment* of the slave-morality who “denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge...” and by keeping players involved this *ressentiment* does not fester to the point where, “it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all.” (GM, bk. 1§10) The coaching style of Jackson’s winning teams always emphasized the internally driven motivation.

Throughout his books he describes teams that he coaches who veer from the path of inner-power and get their ego and desire ensnared with their adversary. It is precisely this attitude that Nietzsche shows is the difference between a “master” and “slave” morality. The master morality dictates the flow of the game through inner-driven will to power (the flow of the game). The slave morality often associated with losing teams rely on “external stimuli to act at all” (GM, §7).

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