Surfing and the Philosophy of Sport
(Studies in Philosophy of Sport)

by
Daniel Brennan

SURFING AND
THE PHILOSOPHY
OF SPORT

DANIEL BRENNAN

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Synopsis

Surfing and the Philosophy of Sport uses the insights gained through an analysis of the sport of surfing to explore key questions and discourses within the philosophy of sport. As surfing has been practiced dynamically, since its beginnings as a traditional Polynesian pursuit to its current status as a counter-culture lifestyle and also a highly professionalized and commercialized sport that will be included in the Olympic Games, it presents a unique phenomenon from which to reconsider questions about the nature of sport and its role in a flourishing life and society. Daniel Brennan examines foundational issues about defining sport, sport's role in conceptualizing the good life, the aesthetic nature of sport, the place of technology in sport, the principles of Olympism and surfing's embodiment of them, and issues of institutionalized sexism in sport and the effect that might have on athletic performance.
Surfing and the Philosophy of Sport

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About the Author

Acknowledgments

I need to acknowledge the incredible influence of my wife and children in keeping me together. Bianca, Amelia, and Orin thank you—we should go to the beach more often. I also must acknowledge the wonderful conversation of Jo Faulkner, who, a few years ago, put me on to Iris Marion Young and the potential for surfing and philosophy to come together—this all began in that chat. Also, in all aspects of my career in philosophy, Marguerite La Caze and Damian Cox have generously given me their time and invaluable advice. I am grateful. Craig Sims has listened to my ideas and provided incredible feedback from his very informed perspective on the surf industry and culture—many ideas in this book originated through conversations with Craig. It is important as well to acknowledge the early mornings and offshore winds that stick in my memory from school days, board under my arm, zinc on my face, and
crumpled uniform in my backpack—utopia was then, and continues each time the wind, tide, and swell align and I put things aside to surf.

Introduction

I have, for my entire adult life, divided my time between two pursuits: surfing and philosophy. I pay keen attention to wind and tides, checking the weather and swell forecasting websites. I have a morning marker, a flag on a nearby building, which tells me which way the wind is blowing. Upon seeing it come from the west my heart beats faster, and I immediately think of what activities I can jettison so I can find my way to the beach—I'm not always successful.

Westerly winds are offshore winds where I live—that is, they move perpendicular from the shore, out to sea, and offshore winds groom the surface of the water, making it smooth and glassy, and allowing the waves to make the elusive barrel. I previously kept a board in my office, so that when the elements lined up, and I had no classes I could race to the surf. I have small kids at home now, and so such frivolous routine dropping isn't as usual as it once was, but even as I write this I'm thinking of the joy at taking my kids to the surf when they are old enough and pushing them into their first waves. I've already started with inflatable surf mats and bodyboards.

One of the more common practices in surfing is waiting. Waiting for the winds, the swell, the tides, the sandbanks, the crowd to disperse, and, most commonly, for the set to come. Much of the practice of surfing is staring at the horizon, waiting for it to ripple with the dark promise of a freight-training wall of water. This is, I think, partly the reason that surf competitions fail to attract massive audiences in the age of internet streaming. It's hard to understand what the fuss is about when there is so much sitting still. Surf media tries to overcome this by packaging surfing into concentrated clips that cut out the tedium of sitting and waiting. However, it is also hard not to think of this sitting as meditation—or time for thinking. Every surfer knows the tranquillity of waiting, out in the still water beyond the breakers, for the waves that are to come.

For me, before writing this book, the kinds of thoughts that usually came in these moments between waves, when I was alone, were of two kinds: philosophical or surf-specific. I either thought about the philosophy I was reading or writing about, or I was analyzing the conditions. Was that bank further down the beach working better? Would the tide improve conditions? Or, alternatively, how might Arendt help me understand a philosophical issue? For most of my life I have surfed, and I discovered philosophy when in my first year of university. Bringing the two together never occurred to me until very recently.

Surfing has, in my view, an uneasy relationship with philosophy in that much of mainstream surf culture is built on the pop-culture impression that surfers are philosophical—what with all that horizon gazing surely they must have the edge on the examined life. Yet, at the same time, that culture seems to express itself through a set of clichés, repeated ad nauseam. I have at home an abundance of surf literature, books, and biographies by famous surfers, novels that treat surfing as a metaphor for some part of life, histories of surfing. Yet when I started to think about what surfers did that was philosophical it all fell a bit short of the rigor that I think characterizes good philosophy. In other words, the writing on surfing, while opening up the possibility for philosophical insight, was rarely sustained. When surfing appears in novels it is usually employed as a metaphor for some aspect of life central to the theme of that novel. So I started to...
think more seriously about drawing out the analogies and seeing what might a philosophical account of some of the important features of surfing do for my understanding of my favorite physical past-time. It was a chance discussion at a bar in Eugene Oregon, where I was for a conference a few years ago, that the idea for writing about surfing as a source for philosophical analysis was planted. I was talking about the emergence of female big wave surfing and how hopeful I was for its flourishing. I must have had a few drinks because I would have been boring the ears off the non-surfers at the bar. An incredible Australian philosopher, Jo Faulkner, suggested I have a look at Iris Marion Young's work on gendered motility to see how female big wave surfing stacked up in comparison. That idea, the first that I wrote down, is the last chapter of this book. As I was writing it I began filling a notebook with observations, exploring the work philosophers had written on surfing, nature sports, extreme sports, and sports in general, as well as chasing all of the metaphorical depictions of surfing I had been collecting. More importantly, I started to think, philosophically, about what I was doing when I was in the water. The more I read the more excited I became at just how rich the potential was for a complimentary discourse between surfing and philosophy. My next "eureka" moment came while reading Matthew Sharpe's excellent book on the philosophical insights of Albert Camus. I was to offer a response to the book at an upcoming conference and I had no idea what to say. As I read Camus's thoughts on how his childhood in Algeria, spent swimming in the Mediterranean, informed the way he thought, I reflected on the way that the beach, for me too, had worked to shape my views on nature and life. Sharpe also demonstrated the great value to the unique inflection that Camus gives to many of the pressing questions of mid-twentieth-century French philosophy—an inflection partly formed by his experiences in the ocean. I was quickened at the idea that the way one spends one's leisure time could change the way one thinks about all sorts of problems. Significantly, the beauty of the coast and the memory of what it was like to be immersed in the water, looking at the horizon, swimming with the currents, and then returning back to land, refreshed and with new eyes, provided Camus with a lot of the optimistic hope found in his oeuvre. Consider the following passage from Helen's Exile: The Mediterranean has its sunlit tragedy which is not that of the mists. On certain evenings on the sea, at the foot of the mountains, night falls on the perfect curve of a little bay, and an anguished fullness rises from the silent water. We realize in such places that if the Greeks experienced despair, it was through beauty and its oppressive quality. Tragedy, in this Golden sadness, reaches its highest point. Our own time, on the contrary, has nourished its despair in ugliness and in convulsions. That is why Europe would be ignoble, if grief could ever have this quality. The passage really stuck with me—I remember watching the sunset while out in the ocean one afternoon and being unable to think of anything else. Here was Camus, reflecting on his time in the sea, and sharply pointing his reminiscences toward philosophical questions on nature and politics. What resonated with me was the sheer solidity of the layer of human experience Camus was describing and the fecundity of the insights found by thinking through old questions in philosophy and contemporary issues. And Camus didn't even catch waves. So, I started to think more seriously...
about my time in the water. What had I learned, and what could my experiences in surfing contribute to thoughts on the other philosophical issues? So I started writing. I am a political philosopher by training, and so I put my mind to think about Sharpe's book, and Camus while staring at the horizon—one evening, as the sunset and the waves were good. I remember taking a wave and not timing my entrance into it very well. I was unceremoniously deposited onto the sandbank underneath the wave only to then have the rest of the heaving body of water crash over me. I had to wait, concentrating so as not to panic, for the initial violence of the wave to stop before I could reach the surface. Wiping out, as it is called by surfers, is not the prettiest part of the sport, but as I came to the surface and paddled back out, I wondered about what had just happened, and as I had been reading Camus, some thoughts analyzing the philosophical significance of wiping out started to form. I put them to paper that night, and they formed the response to Sharpe's book. I also sent them to a national surf magazine in an edited, more accessible form, and they were published there.

Sharpe had pointed out that for Camus, nature stood as a horizon of meaning over and above the social meaning of phenomenon that might persist for a moment. Surfing is a sport that is undeniably full of commercialism. Logos adorn every piece of equipment from the shapers mark on the board to the branding of the deck grip that I stand on. What I wrote about was the way that when dumped by a wave, the surfer would find it very difficult to maintain the commercially instituted identity they paddled out with. As surfers might say, the ocean is a great leveler. So, I wrote about identity and what we might see ourselves as while being rolled across the ocean floor. The response was great and so I kept recording thoughts finding that the more I thought about surfing through the lens of philosophy, the more it offered up.

In thinking through these problems, I came to the area of philosophy that I previously had read little of, the philosophy of sport. Here were authors taking seriously the kids of experiences one has in sporting activity and applying them to philosophical problems. In these authors, the idea of sports' competition becoming a moment of tragic insight was taken seriously. The more I read in this area the more I wondered about whether surfing would provide different insights than those found in other sports; there are a few excellent articles on surfing, but otherwise not much had been written from that perspective. Hence, I began to fill a notebook with a flurry of thoughts about the uniqueness of surfing as a sporting activity capable of providing philosophical insight. As the notebook filled, some topics began to stand out more than others, and the skeleton of this book began to take shape. Essentially this book is a series of essays on different topics within the philosophy of sports as considered from the perspective of a surfer.

Chapter 1 explores a series of related questions about the nature of sport. A vexed and seemingly unanswerable question in the philosophy of sports is the originating one of what actually a sport is. An equally frustrating question is what is surfing? I begin the chapter by limiting my definition of surfing to the activity of riding waves using what is known as a shortboard—this is the most popular way to ride a wave, and it is also the only version of surfing included in the Olympics. It might be, for any reader who rides waves on other surf craft, a contentious way to define surfing; however, my aim is not to try and diminish the importance of other forms of
wave-riding but instead to focus on the most popular competitive version of the sport, along with the recreational version of the same manner of riding waves, I am hoping to maintain a rigor to the analysis. In meaningful ways, one when riding a bodyboard or a standup-paddle board or whatever surf craft is actually trying to do something different than when riding other surf craft. The differences might be subtle, but they matter, and so by limiting my discussion to surfing on short-boards, I am better able to articulate the specific aims of surfing in such a way. On the question of defining sports, I test several attempts to define sports, whether through their formal structure, as in the work of Bernard Suits, through the institutional structure, as in the work of Graham McFee, through the internal values available to the participant, and by exploring the definitions of kinds of sports of which surfing might be considered a part—like Kevin Krein's notion of nature sports.4Chapter 2 begins with an exploration of the contrasting but popular understandings of surfing as either a utopian or subversive activity. There is a fascination with surfing by non-surfers that has few parallels in other sports. There is something about the time in the water and dropping out of mainstream society that non-surfers are attracted to. Historians Peter Westwick and Peter Neushul argue that eighteenth-century accounts, being relayed back to Europe, of the blissful lives of Hawaiian natives, swimming and playing in the waves were a source of inspiration for enlightenment thinkers on the importance of pleasure for the good life. Hence it is important to see to what extent surfing is a part of the good life. I make this analysis in reference to the idea of utopia. Bernard Suits' literary creation of the sage-like Grasshopper has game-playing as the essential activity of utopia, and so the concept is key for the chapter. I also employ the analysis of surf tragic Mark Renneker made by Pulitzer Prize–winning memoirist William Finnegan to question whether or not a life of only surfing resembles utopia or something far baser.5 The key point of the chapter is that surfing's goods require a mundane life for them to be valuable. That is, surfing can be a part of a good life, but to wholly pursue the goods of surfing one must jettison many features of what a good life is. Hence, in chapter 2, I also turn my attention to a less rigid definition of utopia by exploring the existential notion of utopia described by Kenneth Aggerholm.6 For Aggerholm, whether an activity is work or play is determined by the individual undertaking it. Such definitional agency is the purview of the Sartrean notion of freedom. To draw out this idea, I explore some literary depictions of surfing from various novels to show that surfing offers a meaningful opportunity to reflect on one's freedom. It offers a testing ground for character, and a distant place to think through one's situation and identify levers for free action. Surfing is, as described by its purist participants, as an art form. Surfers draw lines on waves and see such rare natural beauty that the term art is a term thrown around in surf discourse without much reflection on what is meant by it. Chapter 3 remedies this and explores the question of the relationship between sport, the movement of the athlete, and art. C.L.R. James's magnificent book Beyond the Boundary in my mind offers an excellent account of how a sport can be a cultural force and also an artistic phenomenon worthy of reflecting on.7 For James, more people considered and reflected on the aesthetic qualities of Victorian-era cricket players than went to the National Gallery to look at a Turner masterpiece.
Hence, the aesthetic quality of the cricketer gives insight into the society which appreciates it by considering the nature of the musings they make on the gesture. It is this idea that drives my analysis of surfing and art. I explore the critics of the idea that sport can be art and ultimately find them all wanting in their definition of art. It is when art is broadened from a traditionalist notion of painting, dance, and sculpture that we can see sport, and especially surfing, as an aesthetic practice where that sense of beauty is intrinsic to the activity.

Chapter 4 explores the role of technology in contemporary competitive surfing by contrasting technological advances in board design and artificial wave generation. A surfboard is the result of a historical process of development. I suggest rather than representing a less-efficient means for completing an activity, a surfboard is designed to be the most efficient way to ride waves. A larger board might paddle faster, but it does not allow the rider to access more critical parts of the wave. Indeed, the history of board design is an attempt to more easily access the most critical parts of a wave. Such a progressive view of technology contrasts, I will claim, with technology that recreates waves. Waves that are generated in wave pools lack many of the valuable features of the activity of surfing—the randomness, the variability, and most importantly, the rarity. Hence, the dream of surfers to make a wave that is abundant is paradoxically removing some of the important features that make waves valuable to ride in the first place. Not only is some of the natural mystique of a wave lost in its recreation, but due to the similarity of every wave in the pool, the surfer's performance is turned from a judgment of athletic spontaneity to a homogenized routine. In this chapter, I spell out the implications for such a change for future Olympic events if surfing is to remain an Olympic sport.

Chapter 5 considers surfing newly attained position as an Olympic sport. Surfing's roots in counterculture rebellion have been completely reversed, and surfing now sits as a new Olympic sport alongside track and field events, gymnastics, and other traditional sports. Surfing is not the first counterculture sport to make it into the Olympics, but I do think it is a unique case. When we look at other less mainstream or counterculture sports that have found popular traction as Olympic events, such as snowboarding, there is usually some other sport there that is similar in some regard, to be conceptually close enough to enable that sport's governing to be handled by a larger sporting governance body. BMX, for example, which was first run as an Olympic sport, is now governed by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). The UCI oversees all of the different versions of sports that are competed on bicycles. Similarly, whereas at one stage some ski resorts banned snowboarding for the foul behavior it evoked from its participants, snowboarding is now governed by the International Ski Federation (FIS). That the International Olympic Committee chose to recognize FIS instead of the already existing International Snowboarding Federation was controversial at the time. That is interesting for considering surfing. One might hazard a guess that the decision was made to remove some of the counterculture presence within the sport's administration. That surfing's governing body—the International Surfing Association—has not been overlooked in preference of a more recognized governing body might hint at either the preparedness of the IOC to take a risk or that the assessment is that surfing is already professional enough, or at least no longer
counterculture and so posing little risk to the Olympic ideal. At the very least, it is hard to see what other sports surfing has enough in common with which could see its governance being merged with that sport. As I stretch myself to think through it, the closest I come to is certain sliding winter sports, like skiing or snowboarding. However, surfing is not like these sports in many essential ways. Surfing's inclusion in the Olympics hence represents a timely opportunity to reflect on the values of Olympism and to test whether surfing's new status demonstrates a commitment by the IOC to the principles. It also represents a moment to reflect on what the values of Olympism might mean if adopted and promoted for the sport of surfing.

To think through these questions I will analyze each of the principles of Olympism in turn and offer an assessment of surfing's ability to claim fealty to them. I will explore the idea of surfing promoting a philosophy of life, in line with the IOC's commitment to the idea in the philosophy of Olympism.

Daniel Dombrowski describes athletics adherence to Olympism as a kind of teleological process of bringing out the best in the athlete—showing the athlete some latent ability and honing their skill in that activity. My issues with surfing's authentic congruence to the principles of Olympism, developed out in chapter 5, are all to do with inclusion and discrimination. That surfing is a sport practiced today primarily from a cultural discourse between Australia, California, and Hawaii, and that the current surf culture has very little to do with the Polynesian roots of the sport is worth dwelling on. The stereotypical surfer has blonde sun-bleached hair, tanned white skin, and wears clothes that identify with a fashion derived in California or the East Coast of Australia. The original surfers were Polynesian men and women, riding waves as a complex social game that demonstrated courage, skill, and style. It was a part of the social fabric of Hawaiian society. The degree of cultural appropriation involved in the formation of the identity of modern surfing is tremendous. To think of a surfer today is to recall that image of the Californian local. For Peter Westwick and Peter Neushul, the "Californiaization" of surfing stems from the identification of the stereotypical Vietnam draftee as a surfer. They cite cultural references from films, such as Apocolypse Now, where the crazed, risk-taking surfers chase waves under mortar fire as evidence of a cultural trend to shift the image of a surfer to what they call "an existential cowboy." Rather than surfing being a way to unite a society, surfing is a counterculture activity, with its own forms of commercialization, localism, entrenched forms of institutional oppression. Consequently, it really is an important question for surfing to pose about its ability to represent and propound the value of Olympism.

The final chapter was the first one to be composed. It represents my initial musings on the philosophical significance of sexism in surfing. In chapter 6, I look at the notion of gendered motility by appealing to the work of Iris Marion Young. Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" essay has been debated since its publication, and Young herself even revised some of her initial findings. I explore the differences in gendered motility using the analysis of Young to explain why the sexualization of the female surfer might inhibit their motility on a wave; ultimately, I argue against Young's revision of her position and say participation is not enough to remove the detrimental effects on motility that stem from...
institutionalized motility. Ultimately, I appeal to the collective of female surfers who ride very large waves (over twenty feet or higher) for overcoming some of the instituted sexism in surfing. I argue that the big wave surfer does not so easily conform to the gendered image of male or female surfer—the waves they ride are too large for media representations of them to be sexualized while they are surfing. Hence, in these athletes, I find a hopeful moment for the praise of performance that has sex totally abstracted from the praise.

In taking stock of this project I need to acknowledge the incredible insights that other surfers and philosophers have given me. I have tested my ideas with my surfing friends and with my philosopher friends, and found that it was not so difficult to make the arguments speak to both sides. That has been the real joy of this book, marrying up the hemispheres of my work and play, and in the process learning to love both pursuits even more. In my first published article in surf media, I wrote that surfing can be a powerful metaphor for the human condition. I am delighted at what I have learned through other sports philosophers exploring sport and human life, and I hope with this book to add more weight to my claim that surfing is a powerful activity for understanding why we do what we do and value what we value.

NOTES
10. Ibid., 136.
they are individuals escaping from mundane society to experience the unique sights and sensations that only come through riding waves. Surfing thus seems to be best described as play. Johan Huizinga describes play as distinct from ordinary life and yet still an utterly absorbing activity. He describes play as being primarily in the field of aesthetics, and surfing might be said to be an excellent example of this. The beautiful lines the surfer draws on the wave's face are at once an imposition of human order on nature, and this carving a representation of free play. Huizinga further describes the likelihood of participants sharing a play activity forming a community outside of that activity. He writes that “the feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.” Thus, the negative reaction of some surfers to the increasingly visible competitive aspect of surfing seems to be about the perceived loss of some vital component of play. However, most literary descriptions of surfing evoke little more than this artistic, playful side. Surfing is included as an official sport in the Tokyo Olympics. Athletes compete for their countries in the world's most prestigious sporting event. Athletes undertake drug testing to prove they are not enhancing their abilities illegitimately. Crowds mull over the scientific rigor and objectivity of judges' scoring. The event concludes with the playing of a national anthem as the home country's flag of the gold medalist raises behind the medal dais. Surf athletes, in the athlete's village, now stand alongside athletes from more traditional sports, such as track and field, swimming, diving, weightlifting. As they mingle together, as athletes, each competing for the same piece of metal, the critical question must be asked, what does this mean for our understanding of surfing and sport. In sports that have their origin in the Ancient Greek games, the relevant features of sport are easier to discern. The winner is the person who can run the fastest, throw the furthest, lift the heaviest, or swim the fastest. Sports like gymnastics and diving, where judges award the athlete points, seem to be sports-like as the athletes are competing on the same apparatus. The athlete nominates which maneuver they will attempt, and the judges score how well they achieve it. Riding waves is not a race, nor is it about choosing a movement and being judged on its success. The ocean does not offer a stable, constant field, and each wave is very different from the one before it. Thus, one can ask, “What does the winning surfer do better than their defeated opponent?” What does it mean to surf better than another? These questions lead to an overarching question, which will occupy this chapter, what does surfing's inclusion as an Olympic sport mean for our understanding of sports? To answer this, I explore some of the more traditional arguments for what constitutes a sport and test whether or not surfing is compatible with these arguments. I am casting the net quite wide, exploring philosophers from both the analytic and the continental traditions. The different approaches each have their merits and shortcomings, and the analysis will show that conceptually pinning down sport is not that easy. It is important that I define the parameters of the analysis. There are numerous modes of riding waves; however, in this book, surfing refers to the activity of riding a wave while standing on a surfboard. Activities such as bodyboarding,
bodysurfing, longboarding, standup paddle boarding do fall under the umbrella of surf culture. However, the most common form of wave riding today employs the use of what is known as a shortboard and this is generally understood to be the surfboard. The Olympic competition will involve athletes riding shortboards, and the most iconic aspects of surf culture, which have permeated popular culture, refer to this activity. Thus, it is the mode of riding waves that this book is most concerned.

A difficulty for our analysis lies in the substantial gap between how surfing is practiced recreationally and how it is practiced in professionally organized competitions. When a golfer plays a practice round or even attends a driving range, they are preparing to play the game of golf. They are practicing specific skills to employ when attempting to achieve the goal of golf of placing the ball in the hole in as few strokes as possible. The recreational surfer, such as myself, who attends the beach in the morning before work, or, on a lucky day when the conditions are right, and we cancel our dry-land appointments, is clearly not surfing competitively against other surfers. Nor are they trying to overcome a measurable obstacle in the way that the number of golf strokes is the apparent obstacle in golf. They are not practicing surfing so that it can be performed more competitively another time—they are doing something more like a runner who runs, not for race-fitness, but for the enjoyment of running and the health benefits that come with the practice. That is, the surfer who surfs recreationally is still surfing. Thus, it is essential for this analysis to explore this activity as well as the organized surfing competitions. Sports philosophers such as Chad Carlson have attempted to define sports not as a game, but rather as activity aligned with other activities within a sports institution. However, surfers themselves would dispute whether such an institution exists.

Professional surfing is organized by two sizable and at times conflicting governing bureaucracies, the International Surfing Association and the World Surf League. As well as these global professional bodies, there are numerous national bodies, and within nations, there are state and local organizations that provide administrative organization of competitive surfing. Through these organizations, some general rules for competition offer the general layout of how a surf competition works. Usually, a surf competition has a tournament structure. Surfers advance through heats until a winner is determined in a final heat. Heats entail small groups of surfers attempting to ride the best waves in the best way they can in front of judges, during a limited amount of time. A panel of judges give surfers a score out of 10 for each wave they ride, and in each heat, generally, the surfer's best two-wave scores are combined to give a total out of 20. The surfer with the highest heat total, and possibly the second highest as well, progress to the next round of heats until there is a winner. There are many rules around determining which surfer has a priority choice of waves. As it is in recreational surfing, only one surfer can effectively ride a single wave at a time. This is because the track of the path of the surfer inhibits another rider from being able to use the wave. Much of the inherent code of conduct in surfing is around the sharing of the limited waves between surfers. The commonly accepted rule in recreational surfing is that the surfer on the inside of the wave has priority over those outside of them. This is not the case in surfing competitions; instead, the surfer who most recently caught a
wave and returned to the lineup, regardless of their position in the water, is given the last priority over the choice of waves. Competitive surfing does mirror many of the behaviors of recreational surfing; however, there is, in some parts of surf culture, friction between competitive and recreational surfing. Some of the tensions between surfing's dual identity play out to suggest that the kinds of values that surfing creates are dependent upon whether one is referring to competitive or recreational surfing. That is, the values of each are different. Thus, it is worthwhile dwelling momentarily on the uneasy relationship between recreational and competitive surfing.

The attempt in more recent times to describe competitive surfing as a sport has been met with resistance from some surfers. The opposition is noticeable in a probing rhetorical question by journalist Brian Blickenstaff who asks if competitive surfing is merely another way to monetize a fashionable subculture? The sentiment is that the attempt to define surfing as a sport represents an illegitimate capitalist appropriation of an antisocial subculture. Such a view is quite common in surf media and literature. For instance, former professional surfer Junior Faria argues that "a surf competition is a product, not a sport. Just like a surf movie, a magazine, a t-shirt or a surfboard." These views are reflected in John Fiske's earlier semiotic reading of the beach in his seminal book, Reading the Popular. Fiske described surfing as the attempt to experience nature in a raw, uncultured state. For Fiske, surf competitions represent culture's attempt to appropriate the activity. Fiske's suggestion that calling surfing a sport and moving it into the mainstream is clearly offensive to those surfers who have found an identity in the activity's counterculture persona. At the very least it is clear that there is an essential tension between opposing views of what surfing is.

An interesting comparison with the sport of skateboarding can perhaps offer an opportunity for reducing some of this tension in surfing's conceptualization. Brian Glenney has argued that skateboarding, a sport that emerged from surfing, is also considered a lifestyle by some of its participants. Krein describes the way that alternative sports, like skateboarding and surfing, are world-making in the way that they provide a theatre to try out different modes of living away from mainstream behavior. Glenney adds to this that rule subversion is built into the behavior of these sports. For Glenney, an interesting feature shared by skateboarders on the street/park, and those in competitions, is that the activity is about a manipulation of the architecture where the activity takes place. Glenney notes that in competitions, those who most creatively subvert the given apparatus are rewarded with more points. Glenney notes a similar subversion in surfing, where the surfer is given the architecture of the wave, but subverts the shape and movement of the wave by riding it. That skateboarding's counterculture practitioners view their activity as a more holistic subversion of traditional norms and modes of living is what leads to the conflict in the sport's conceptualization. Those who participate in mainstream competitions are doing something in stark contrast to those who see the very idea of competition as incompatible with skateboarding lifestyle. This is clearly an analogous paradox to that in surfing. The competitions try to take the best of "wild" surfing, and place rules, system of organization, and a judging criteria on top of the
The more progressive the surfing, that is the more the surfing resembles the best lifestyle surfing, the higher the points scored. For Glenney, the paradox is somewhat resolved when one considers that what skateboarding competitions represent is a celebration of subverting the rules of a game. This subversion is achieved through what Glenney terms "re-wilding"—a form of interactive play that allows the progression of the sport. Applied back to surfing, such an idea suggests that surf competitions, while still not adored by purists, still displays a productive tension between rule-bound and rule-subversive activity. The more the surfers subvert the rules, the more the sport progresses. Conceptions of surfing which focus on the extreme nature of the activity also provide interesting ideas for understanding surfing as a sport.

The term "action sport" is described by Chrysostomos Giannoulakis and Lindsay Pursglove as a high-intensity adrenaline sport that incorporates an alternative lifestyle into its definition. Proponents of the lifestyle resist the normalizing pressure of inclusion in mainstream culture. Mark Stranger describes surfing in a unified way which is open to the tensions between surf culture and professional competitions. He argues that the foundational experience of surfing, riding waves, offers the chance for the individual to "transcend the social and experience the true self." That surfing also has a commodified surface does not diminish this foundational aspect, but it does add to the complexity of the subculture. Such a definition though leaves open the question of what competitive surfing is, if it is not inclusive of the foundational aspect then is it the commodified surface? And if it is, then is sport the best label to attach to it?

Our question here, in this chapter, isn't whether there is an authentic way to practice surfing or if the commodified structure of contemporary surfing has had a detrimental effect on surf culture. The fact is that surfing is now included as an Olympic sport. Instead, the tension between surfing as an aesthetic pursuit for sublime subjective experiences or surfing as a competitive activity where the surfer aims to score more points than their opponent provides two exciting avenues for exploring the foundational question of the nature of sports. In using surfing to probe attempts to define the nature of sports, we might find that surfing throws up different problems depending on whether we are referring to what most people mean when they say they went surfing or to competitive surfing. Thus, the proceeding investigation will explore some well-regarded attempts to define sports and test whether surfing supports or challenges their conclusions. Of course, it seems most likely that professionally organized competitions will most resemble other sports; however, the resistance to the status of surfing, as a sport, from within surf culture and the fact that noncompetitive surfing is still an athletic pursuit, it is crucial to consider surfing from these two angles.

Towards a Definition of Surfing

In his paper "Is Mountaineering a Sport?," Philip Bartlett makes a case that has a great bearing for our analysis of surfing. Mountaineering, Bartlett claims, has a traditional and modern face. Bartlett describes the traditional activity of mountaineering as the attempt to experience an archaic humility before nature. For Bartlett, there is also a corresponding celebration of the ego inherent in the pursuit, as the mountaineer gives their ego-free reign to demonstrate what it can accomplish. The modern face of mountaineering, Bartlett argues, distorts the traditional view...
by adding generic sports-like features, such as time trials to the activity. Both of the experiences in the traditional form seem to be suggestive of the experiences the surfer is aiming for in recreational surfing, so they are worth exploring in greater depth. Bartlett describes the mountaineer's journey into primitive nature as an experience that takes us back to a more archaic way of living and thinking, and this seems to satisfy a deep seated need. If we believe in the influence of the past, not just culturally but genetically, then it is plausible that wild and remote country feeds into us in a profound way. We might regard much of this as a spiritual experience. 

Surfing is also described as a spiritual experience that is rooted in the immersion in a primal nature. Surfers regularly describe surfing as an escape from the pressures of modern living. The difficulty of simply finding oneself in a place where one can surf, either through the remoteness of the location or the difficulty in paddling a surfboard through the breaking waves to the place where they are ridden from, makes the ocean analogous to the terrain of the mountain. The sense is that the world has been left behind as the surfer sits in the ocean and is afforded, and even encouraged in, an opportunity for contemplation. The riding of a wave, like an experience of conquering a mountain, is exhilarating. Bartlett describes the exhilaration as an instance of egocentrism. His description of the exhilaration of mountaineering is also useful. Mountaineering is an egocentric pursuit, an opportunity for the individual to assert him or herself not only against nature but against other people. The image of the mountain climber, ice axe raised, standing in triumph on top of some conquered snowy summit, is accurate. He has proved he can "do," that determination leads to results, that he has climbed higher and further than the competition. Once again this is quite useful for describing the experience of riding waves. One notes in some of the earliest folklore surrounding surfing that the aspect of surfing most emphasized is the theme of the individual human conquering nature, instead of a humble immersion in the sublime. 

T anis Thorne collected many folklore stories of surfing and notes that in them a trope emerges of a heroic male riding a giant tidal wave to safety—in some variations of the story the hero uses a broken floorboard from a ruined house that happened to float by to ride a hundred-foot tidal surge to shore. Such folktales, although fiction, reveal the third affinity with mountaineering, the exposure to risk. For Bartlett, the danger in navigating a mountain is part of the value of mountaineering. Bartlett cautiously claims that the value lies in the competent overcoming of the obstacles, and the same is true in surfing. The ocean is a dangerous place for everybody, and it takes a high degree of skill and experience to overcome the dangers inherent in riding certain waves—such as shallow reefs, being held underwater for long periods of time, dangerous currents, and so on. To support his analysis, Bartlett quotes Hemmingway, who claimed that the only three real sports were bullfighting, motor racing, and mountaineering. The unifying feature of all three sports is the magnitude of the critical decision the athlete makes. That is, the potential consequences of an athlete's decision in the activity are so significant as to elevate the athlete's performance as representative of the highest limits of human accomplishment. I would argue that surfing, especially the riding of large waves, could be added to this list. Bartlett concludes that mountaineering is a sport if the definition of sport is left
deliberately vague, that is, as an amusement or diversion. The critical discussion in this essay, however, is found in the way that Bartlett distances the experiences available to the mountaineer to those found in Olympic sports. In defining mountaineering in terms of a species-epic—an activity which could be said to offer a grand conception of the possibilities for the human species—Bartlett is opening up the discussion of sports to include something more significant than a contest of strength or speed, and this is worth exploring in greater detail.

Bartlett's explanation of the sports-like qualities of mountaineering as something apart from Olympic sports is interesting because it sets up the idea that sports that are competitions between athletes are somehow lesser than mountaineering because they do not offer the kinds of transcendent experiences available to the "pure" mountaineer. Bartlett hints that modern mountaineering, as opposed to traditional mountaineering, is somehow diminished as it reduces the transcendent experience to a speed and strength contest between mountaineers. Thus, the model of kinds of sport that Bartlett hints at is a dualism; on the one hand, there are species-epics which offer individuals a transcendent encounter with some aspect of nature, and there are Olympic-like sports which are contests between people. It is important to interject that many philosophers of sports are interested in the mythic qualities of the Olympic competitions. The philosophical content of athletic competitions was, for ancient Athens, as instructive about the human condition as Bartlett finds mountaineering to be. Thus, sports such as mountaineering and surfing might have more in common with Olympic sports than Bartlett allows. I will explore this question in greater detail in a later chapter that examines surfing's place in the Olympic mythology.

A more detailed account that includes sports that might be said to share similar features to mountaineering has been made by Kevin Krein who has defined nature sports as sports where nature is a major component of the activity. Krein describes nature sports as describing a relationship between an athlete and some natural feature such as a cliff face or a wave. Such sports, Krein contends, are valuable because they help us to better comprehend our relationship with the natural environment. The natural feature takes on a role that a competitor would play in more traditional sports. Consequently, in nature sports, Krein sees a greater potential to emphasize other goals than winning. Whereas traditional sports which are so obviously built around the notion of winners and losers, it is hard for those sports to not reinforce the idea of the world as a competitive place. Nature sports show the possibility of different, more cooperative conceptions of the world. Like Bartlett, Krein advocates that nature sports are at their best when they don't have the formal structure of competition. Nature sports for Krein a creative space of value creation.

Bartlett, with his appeal to Hemmingway, is not the first to attempt to define sports as a species-epic of wrestling with nature. Roland Barthes in his short work What Is Sports? explores the characteristic features of motor racing, the Tour de France, bullfighting, ice hockey, and football (soccer). After offering a brief account of how each of these sports represents humanity performing at a peak level, Barthes summarizes sport as follows. What is sport? Sport answers this question by another question: who is best? But to this question of the ancient duels, sport gives a new meaning: for man's excellence is sought here only in relation to things. Who is the
best man to overcome the resistance of things, the immobility of nature? Who is the best to work
the world, to give it to men . . . to all men? That is what sport says. Occasionally one would like to
make sport say something else. But sport is not made for that. What need have these men to
attack? Why are men disturbed by this spectacle? Why do they even commit themselves to it so
completely? Why this useless combat? What is sport? What is it then that men put into sport?
Themselves, their human universe. Sport is made in order to speak the human contract.30 For
Barthes sport is like a tragedy, revealing at once our precarious position against nature. The
sports athlete is a tragic hero, the best representation of our ability to momentarily resist nature's
hold over us. The sense here is that the athlete does things that ordinary individuals aspire to—
she is a symbol of the best of us. Barthes's choice of sports is important. In each of the sports, he
analyzes a different athletic epic is on display. In bullfighting, as it is for Hemmingway, the
matador dances with grace in front of the imminent threat of violent death posed by the bull. The
matador, against the strength, fearfulness, and brute violence of the bull, opposes with courage,
strategy, and beauty.31 Barthes writes that the matador's victory dance is a spectacle "so that it
might become the victory of all those watching him and recognizing themselves in him."32
Hence, the essential contribution of bullfighting to an understanding of sports is that it
represents a metaphorical battle with nature, highly ritualized and spectacular. Teresa González
Aja, in taking stock of much of the philosophical literature on bullfighting, writes that the matador
needs to be understood as a "gladiator who incarnates the value of the hero."33 She writes that
the sport is like a tragic spectacle where a fight to death presents a dilemma before the crowd
through which they define themselves.34 If Barthes is correct then we can claim that surfing
shares all of the important features of bullfighting. When riding a large wave, the surfer willingly
places themselves in a dangerous position, where the sheer might of nature is on vivid display
and can at any moment cause great harm to the surfer. The sublime immensity of the wave
frames the surfer's movements and the surfer, like the bullfighter, responds with style. For
Barthes, style is "to be courageous without, to give necessity the appearance of freedom."35
The accomplished surfer riding a massive wave is the embodiment of style. Carl Thomen, in
describing the spectatorship of Kelly Slater (the most iconic name in competitive surfing)
riding one of the world's most dangerous waves—the Pipeline in Hawaii—contends that the viewer is
given a glimpse into the sublime. Thomen writes that the surf spectator watches "superlative
aesthetic experience, and outstanding athletic achievement and a window into an inner gift;
something deeply personal made public, a connectedness we are all capable of, but seldom
seem to achieve."36 The experience of surf spectatorship that Thomen describes is akin to
Barthes's description of bullfighting. Thomen describes the surfer as pitting themselves against
an incredible natural force. The viewer is reminded through the surfer's athleticism and style of
"man's ability to rise above and transcend not only fearful waves, but fear itself."37 There is in
surfing this aspect of the species-epic that Barthes describes in sport. The second sport which
Barthes analyzes is motor racing, and his conclusion is similar to Bartlett's—the sport
challenges the individual to make decisions in a very short space of time which can have, if
incorrectly chosen, result in very drastic consequences. For Barthes, the motor racers cheat space and time as they refine their equipment and hone their lines around corners to shave hundredths of a second off of lap times. This is the meaning of a great automobile race: that the swiftest force is only a sum of various kinds of patience, of measurements, of subtleties, of infinitely precise and infinitely demanding actions.

The surfer riding a dangerous wave, in my reading, resembles Barthes's motor racer insofar as to "tame" the wave, that is, ride it without falling off, a complex interplay of technology, condition reading, and practiced motor movements combine to endow the surfer with a swiftness to be able to navigate the challenges of the wave face. The ultimate experience in surfing is finding oneself in the enclosed hollow space created when a curling wave rolls over. The wave breaks the space known as the barrel or tube, moves along with it, sometimes at high speed. The best surfers are those who ride in the barrel at high speed while also making minuscule adjustments to their positioning to stay in the temporary and moving space but also to find their way out of it when the wave shuts down completely. Hence surfing is not only about responding to the sublime with grace but also about utilizing skill and technology to navigate specific challenges.

The third sport analyzed by Barthes, cycling in the Tour de France, also has relevance for this discussion of surfing. For Barthes, the cyclists conquering of the mountain is another example of humanity fighting the resistance of things. The hardest parts of the tour for the athletes are the mountain stages. For Barthes, the conclusion of the mountain stage is "a condensation of the entire human adventure." The struggle against the mountain supplies narratives of winners, unlucky contenders, self-control, and despair. Considered alongside the Tour de France, the contest with the ocean enacted by the surfer is analogous insofar as in any good swell event one can see a similar condensation of what Barthes describes as the human adventure. For example, at the famous break Kirra on Queensland's Gold Coast, when there is a swell event supplying waves, the physical features of the break are as much a part of the attempt to ride the waves as anything else. The current is incredibly strong wrapping around a rock groin, and so the surfers paddle incessantly against the current to jostle for the best position to catch the best waves. The wave itself is incredibly hollow and fast meaning that despite the intense physical effort to stay in the wave catching zone, one is still in no small degree dependent on strategy and luck to catch the best waves. At the end of the day, the wave claims more victims than winners and a host of broken boards litter the shoreline. Surfing, like cycling, is an athletic pursuit of endurance that also transcends the endurance aspect as the surfer is attempting to endure nature, which is not always endurable.

The last two sports that Barthes explores are the least like surfing, yet even these share some essential features in Barthes's analysis with surfing. Ice hockey and football are obviously team sports and thus not at all like surfing. For Barthes, these team sports are best understood regarding the relationship between the teams and the audience who fill the stadium to cheer them. For Barthes, the way that millions of people tune in to watch a football match illuminates the essential character of sports as a means of communication. The achievements of the athletes in these sports are shared by the onlookers who seem to grimace with the athlete at...
a missed opportunity, and who shout with the player upon scoring of a goal. To watch, here, is not only to live, to suffer, to hope, to understand but also, and especially, to say so—by voice, by gesture, by facial expression; it is to call the whole world to witness: in a word, it is to communicate. Ultimately man knows certain forces, certain conflicts, joys and agonies: sport expresses them, liberates them, consumes them without ever letting anything be destroyed.42 The spectatorship of surfing, whether competitive or not, offers a similar communicative experience. Surfers are famous for the loud hoot made to express joy at another surfer's performance. As a surfer emerges from a good wave an entire lineup of surfers can simultaneously hoot with shared joy. The facial expression of another surfer paddling past after a good wave conveys all that can be said about the species-epic of surfing. The surfer at home watching a live stream of a professional surfer in a competition catch a great wave shares in the achievement in the same way a viewer of a football match does. The raised arms of the champion who has survived an ordeal with nature convey to the world the shared humanity found in such struggles.

Steven Connor takes the idea of sport as a metaphor for humanity further than Barthes. For Connor, surfing represents an activity which can offer a new and complementary way of connecting with nature in a time of environmental uncertainty.43 The ocean is "an arena for a human struggle."44 Connor makes his claim following on from Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of snow skiing and the motion of "sliding" in Being and Nothingness.45 For Sartre, sliding on snow, or on water, gives the slider a unique view on their relationship with the concrete things of the world. The snow, before the skier is like a blank canvas and the sliding movement of the athlete displaces the world as they move through the snow. The tracks, behind the skier, are like a historical relation, proof of the choices of the skier—their own unique motion through time. For Sartre, the trackless slider is the ideal motion, as it would represent a continuous creativity, and so Sartre praises sports which slide through water. Connor, building on Sartre, points out that in surf literature classic Walking on Water, Andy Martin describes surfing as the manifesting of divine energy. For Martin, as the spirit of God is said in the Book of Genesis to move on the face of water, the surfer therefore reflects or embodies divinity as they traverse the wave's face.46 For Connor, surfing fits in a category of sports as a replication of the current modes of war, as, in this age, war is a war against the world. Rather than human versus human, in surfing the fight bill is man against the world. The surfer's movements along the wave mirror human consciousness, as Sartre understands it, as far as the glide along the wave is like a continuous creation, leaving its wake momentarily in the wave but ultimately, ahead of the surfer the way is free and the concreteness of her choices is demonstrated in the wake left behind. Whereas for Sartre, the aim of such track-making activity is domination—making the natural feature bend to the will of the athlete, for Connor the aim of the activity is not combative. In this battle, for Connor, nature is not conquered; instead, the sport aims at a flourishing relationship with nature. It is principally the movement of controlled glissade, in what have become known as "sliding sports," that embodies this new relation to the things of the world, in which the sportsman and the
no longer simply against a human opponent, but is rather triangulated by the intermediary of wind, rock or wave, one seeks to bounce back from or slide across an adversary that one aims to make one's auxiliary. 47 For Conner, surfing's depiction of a human metaphor is brimful of meaning for a possible restatement of humanity's relationship to nature. Such a view is in line with Barthes's understanding of sports as important mythology. Other philosophers have explored existential questions through an analysis of sports. Kenneth Aggerholm demonstrates that sports is an excellent tool for pursuing existential questions because it is a metaphor for the human condition. 48 That sports sits between "the grinding seriousness of necessary labor and the wholly capricious nature of play" is "profoundly expressive of the human condition." 49 Similarly to Connors and Barthes, Aggerholm's paper is brimful of insight into how sports can illuminate an essential aspect of the human endeavor. However, the issue is that only cherry-picked examples of sports allow such promising inquiry. It is debatable whether one can make such grand claims in an analysis of foot running. For example, in foot running, a species-epic might not be discernible—as the natural feature of the road or track is not seen as the great obstacle. That is the runner is not doing battle with or finding a new way to have a stylistic relation with the world. Thus, attempts such as these only really require that some play activity be found, it need not necessarily be sports, and by using that play activity as a means of describing the human endeavor, the door is left open for any play activity to allow such philosophizing. I could, if I stretched my logic, explore the play of a baby, reaching for a rattle and describe the way that the exertion which causes the creation of millions of neuron links and radically changes the brain so that the baby can become adept at utilizing objects in its environment is an excellent metaphor for the human condition. What does such a claim mean for our understanding of the difference between sports and play? Ultimately not much at all. What Barthes, and others like him, are offering is a summary of the importance of sports built on the assumption that one already has an intuitive understanding of what sports are.