

O Captain! My Captain!: Leadership, Virtue, and Sport

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Abstract

There is a crisis of leadership in sport. Leadership as an athletic excellence is under threat from the deepening influence of coaches on in-game decisionmaking. To appreciate what is being lost in this shift of responsibility, it is necessary to understand the challenge of athlete leadership. Captaincy is the quintessential on-field leadership role. However, the role of captain, and athlete leadership more widely, remains philosophically untheorized. This paper initiates a discussion of leadership in sport by providing the first normative account of captaincy. Rugby union is used as a case study, as this sport preserves an especially demanding and complex form of captaincy that may provide a rough template for the revival of athlete leadership in other sports. A virtue theoretical analysis of the role is developed based on a functionalist conception of virtue. It is argued that discharging the responsibilities of such captaincy requires two key virtues: 'sporting judgement' and 'responsibility'.

Keywords

Captaincy; Leadership; Virtue Ethics; Judgement; Rugby Union.

Introduction

There is a crisis of leadership in sport, not only in the boardroom but also on the playing field. The crisis emanates not from a shortage of credible leaders or a distrust of existing leaders, but from the erosion of leadership opportunities for players. In contemporary elite and professional sport, what happens on the field is, to an increasing degree, orchestrated by those off it. In soccer, the image of the manager shouting and gesticulating to players across the pitch is commonplace. In rugby union, instructions from the coaches' box are relayed to players by water carrier personnel. In American football, direct radio communication from coach to player proceeds by an earpiece embedded in the player's helmet (Princiotti 2018).

The rising influence of coaches and analysts – 'coaching creep' – has precipitated the erosion of on-field leadership. No doubt, the precarity of the modern coach's job sharpens their desire to exercise ever more control on the games by which they are judged. However, this trend cuts to the justifiability of sporting competition, because the ethical defensibility of competitive team sports¹ (especially at sub-elite levels) depends in part on the opportunity they provide players to lead and be led by their peers. Consequently, as leadership shifts from players to coaches, the justification of team-based sporting competition in terms of athletic excellence becomes more fragile. Coaching creep diminishes sport as a training ground of leadership, so we should exercise caution before we allow this central sporting excellence to fade into insignificance, thereby altering many team sports' 'balance of excellences' (Devine 2010).

The preeminent on-field leadership role is that of 'captain'. This is not true of every team sport: basketball teams often do not select a captain

and, for American football teams, the role is largely symbolic, designating seniority within the team. However, in many team sports (e.g. soccer, cricket, field hockey, and volleyball) the role of captain is consequential on account of its formal and informal leadership responsibilities. So, an important means to protect on-field leadership, and by extension athlete leadership, is to protect the significance of captaincy.

Team sports make possible the cultivation of a distinct cluster of virtues among players. Principal among these are virtues associated with teamwork and leadership: of being led by and leading one's peers. So, one of the key sub-clusters of virtue that team sports are designed to cultivate is 'leadership virtues'. If sporting competition is to be preserved as a context in which leadership and followership virtues can be cultivated, we must protect and elevate the role of captain within team sports. Unless the responsibilities and associated virtues of captaincy are articulated, we cannot appreciate what is lost through coaching creep.

Philosophers of sport have undertaken normative analyses of sporting roles such as referee,² coach,³ and player,⁴ but not of captain. Leadership in sport remains normatively untheorised.⁵ In this respect, the philosophy of sport lags behind sport psychology where leadership (and captaincy) have been subject to sustained examination.⁶

Suitability for captaincy incorporates myriad different factors. Such considerations include a captain's availability to play (including their injury profile and disciplinary record), their playing ability, their position on the field, their foreign language skills (to communicate with foreign referees), their playing philosophy (in particular, whether their philosophy aligns well with the coach's), and their personal beliefs and history (whether they hold morally abhorrent beliefs or have committed

offences that may render them an improper person to hold the role). This paper focuses on *character*. It examines the qualities of character – the virtues – that captains must possess if they are to discharge well the responsibilities of their role. In short, this paper asks: who has the character for captaincy?

I explore captaincy in rugby union (henceforth referred to as ‘rugby’).⁷ Captaincy in rugby exhibits a broad array of captaincy responsibilities. So, while the responsibilities and challenges faced by captains are both sport- and context-specific, this case study promises to shed light on captaincy in a variety of other sports that share elements of rugby captaincy. While the account developed is not a general account of captaincy applicable to all team sports – captaincy may not be amenable to such an account – it promises to illuminate captaincy beyond rugby.⁸

I adopt a functionalist approach to virtue whereby the captaincy virtues are defined as those traits and capacities that are conducive to the competent execution of the role’s responsibilities. I ask what virtues are most important for the execution of the characteristic responsibilities of the role given the challenges that captains typically encounter.⁹ What counts as a ‘captaincy virtue’ is established by examining what traits and capacities are conducive to the excellent execution of the responsibilities of the role of captain.¹⁰

In section 1, I begin the normative analysis by delineating the responsibilities of captaincy. In section 2, I examine the implications of this account for the nature and content of captaincy virtues. I argue that two fundamental captaincy virtues can be identified in rugby: ‘sporting judgement’ and ‘responsibility’. First, I clarify key terms that are central to the discussion that follows.

The laws of rugby define the ‘captain’ as the player ‘nominated by a team to lead that team, consult the referee and select options relating to referee decisions’ (World Rugby 2020, 17). Captains are distinguished from teammates by their occupying a formally prescribed leadership role. They take decisions on behalf of the team and represent the team to the referee. Captains are both decisionmakers and implementers – they are directly involved in the implementation of the decisions that they take.¹¹ This means that captains must combine playing and leadership roles. The role of captain is underdescribed by the laws of the game. As detailed in Section 2, many of the captain’s most important responsibilities are a matter of convention.

On the functionalist approach to virtue, prior to the determination of virtues for the role, it is necessary to identify the ends of the role.¹² A team’s possible ends are many and varied. They might include concerns as diverse as on-field victory, entertaining the fans, increasing the team’s wealth, improving individual player contracts, perfecting the talents of players, or playing in accordance with a shared conception of how the sport should be played. Despite this diversity, I assume that an overarching goal for any (morally defensible) team is ‘substantive winning’. This is to be distinguished from ‘scoreboard winning’. Scoreboard winning occurs when one is deemed by the relevant authority (e.g. the referee or sports governing body) to have won the match. It is possible to ‘scoreboard win’ through illegitimate means such as undetected cheating or refereeing error. Scoreboard winning has no procedural requirement: one may scoreboard win by whatever means are necessary to cause the relevant authority to deem one the winner. By contrast, substantive winning requires that one follows the prescribed means within the sport to an acceptably high degree.¹³ If winning on the

scoreboard were all that mattered, then captaincy virtues understood functionally would involve excellence in cheating, match-fixing, and corruption. This implication is blocked by the normative constraint that limits team ends to substantive winning.

In light of these clarifications, the question this paper addresses can be reformulated as follows: ‘what virtues are conducive to a captain’s suitability for the pursuit of substantive winning while discharging the characteristic formal and informal responsibilities of captaincy in elite and professional rugby?’

Having clarified key terms and refined the scope of the question, I now begin the normative analysis by detailing the responsibilities of rugby captaincy.

2. The Responsibilities of Captaincy

The responsibilities of captaincy are drawn both from the laws of rugby and its conventions. These responsibilities are of four principal kinds: a. valuational; b. decisional; c. motivational; and d. representational. I examine each in turn.

a. Valuational

Captains play an active role in defining the ‘culture’ or ‘ethos’ of their team.¹⁴ A team’s ethos is the standards of conduct and athletic achievement by which the team judges itself. It includes the team’s goals, playing standards (i.e. the team’s self-defined minimum acceptable and aspirational performance levels), work ethic at training and in competition; playing philosophy (i.e. the overarching strategy the team employs in competition); and standards of conduct (i.e. ethical norms to

which the team aspires both within and outside the sporting context). So, a team's ethos will dictate, for example, whether it is lazy or industrious, whether it plays conservatively or expansively, and whether it considers cheating and gamesmanship to be acceptable means of play.

Captains are not just functionaries, charged with finding the best means to achieve antecedently determined ends. They work in tandem with the head coach to shape the team's ethos. The coach and captain's beliefs and expectations in these respects must be closely aligned. Indeed, it is not unusual for a coach to select a captain principally on account of a perceived alignment of this kind.¹⁵ If a marked discontinuity were to arise between the values espoused by the coach and the captain, inconsistent messaging to players is likely to follow, and the problems of divided loyalty and confused decisionmaking may arise.

b. Decisional

As well as responsibility for shaping and crystallising the team's ethos, the captain must also take decisions on behalf of the team. At the coin toss prior to matches, the captain decides whether to kick off or play from a particular end of the field.¹⁶ During the match, when their team is awarded a penalty or a free kick, they select from among the available options provided in the laws. If a fundamental strategic change is required, it is the captain (perhaps in consultation with the outhalf and attack leaders) who decides on such a change. While other teammates may take responsibility for specific aspects of a team's play (e.g. attack, defence, or lineouts) the captain is the authoritative decisionmaker on the pitch. Teammates must follow the captain's instructions simply because they have been issued by the captain.

c. Motivational

As well as shaping values and taking decisions informed by those values, the captain is also responsible for ‘mobilizing the energies’ (Keohane 2010, 19) of teammates to enact those decisions.¹⁷

The motivational function of captaincy is to evoke enhanced effort, discipline, and a willingness to assume physical risk. ‘Enhanced effort’ may extend to exertion in training or a match. It may also involve the performance of unglamorous, burdensome work such as chasing back after a kick or running across the field to block a possible attack – work that is unlikely to be praised or rewarded by others. ‘Discipline’ involves strategic discipline in binding oneself to the team’s strategy, lifestyle discipline in maintaining a diet and habits conducive to performance, and ethical discipline in forgoing opportunities to cheat in competition. Finally, a ‘willingness to assume physical risk’ involves freely placing oneself in harm’s way to advance the team’s interest. Rugby is a high-impact collision sport that places players at risk of serious physical harm. In motivating one’s teammates, a captain must encourage a willingness among them to place themselves in danger where this would benefit performance.¹⁸

In order to motivate players effectively, the captain must have a firm grasp of how they are viewed by their teammates. First and foremost, the captain must succeed in cultivating positive relationships with teammates. If teammates have contempt for the captain, for example, they are unlikely to be receptive to the captain’s attempts to motivate them. If teammates have general respect for the captain but believe them to be a poor speaker, then attempts to motivate through persuasion, rhetoric, and rousing speeches are unlikely to be effective for that captain. Different players will be motivated in different ways, and good captains employ different strategies to achieve the desired end. Some players may respond

best to criticism, others to praise, others to fear, others to example, others to loyalty, and so on. Captains also have to judge when no further motivation is needed.¹⁹ Crucially, however, captains must consider not just how players are best motivated but how *they* can best motivate these players. The captain must always formulate their motivational strategies in reference to what they can reasonably expect to bring about given their own particular skills and how their players are like to respond to them.²⁰

A key motivational task for captains is to ensure that teammates maintain their joint commitment towards the advancement of the team's goals by the prescribed means. The captain is charged with maintaining the team's joint action – with ensuring that they collectively espouse a goal (e.g. substantive winning) and all act in ways that are appropriate for the achievement of their joint goal, and each acts like this in light of the fact that they share this goal.²¹ The captain is charged with persuading players to temper the pursuit of their own individual good with the commitment that they hold jointly with teammates to advance the team good. Ensuring joint action is no small task, especially when player morale is low or as they approach the end of a season in which they are no longer title contenders, when some players will soon be out of contract and leaving for other clubs (or perhaps no club), and others have been selected to play important international matches in a matter of days or weeks.

d. Representational

The final responsibility is to represent the team. Captaincy incorporates three principal representative functions: mediator, spokesperson, and advocate.

The captain acts as a mediator between the players and the coaching and management groups. In this role, the captain will act as a delegate on

behalf of the team, bringing forward the team's express concerns to the coaching and management staff. Such concerns may range from training methods, to game plans, to player welfare concerns. They may also relay messages from the coaching and management groups to teammates.

The captain is also a spokesperson for the team to the wider public.²² They offer an account of the team's performance to the fans and media before and after matches, and, on behalf of the team, they may speak directly to the opposition, perhaps to offer congratulations or commiserations, following matches. I focus my attention on this third representational role, as this is the most philosophically rich of the three.

The third representative role of captaincy is to represent the team to the referee. Only the captain is permitted to enter into a dialogue with the referee over their decisions. Captains may address the referee concerning their interpretation of the laws (e.g. how long on the ball constitutes 'killing' the ball); the application of the laws (e.g. whether a particular front row forward caused a scrum to collapse); the consistency of their application of the laws; the enforcement of the laws, including prioritisation within the laws (e.g. which rules should be enforced and how strictly); and sanctions that should follow rule violations (e.g. whether a particular high tackle should receive a penalty only, a yellow card, or a red card). Through their advocacy, the captain can (attempt to) inform the referee's judgement regarding both the facts of the game and the law as it pertains to those facts. If successful, such dialogue may expand the number of valuable options available to the team or lead directly to a desired outcome for them.²³

Central to a captain's execution of the advocacy role is the cultivation of rapport with the referee. The referee has wide discretion to determine

how much dialogue with a captain they are willing to entertain.²⁴ Captains who fail to form a rapport may have more limited opportunity to make representations to the referee and, therefore, less opportunity to influence the referee's interpretation of the match in their team's favour.

This advocacy role places the captain in the position of a trustee.²⁵ They communicate directly with the referee, attempting to advance the team's interest, but not in a way that involves communicating their teammates' views to the referee. As trustee, the captain speaks on behalf of the team to the referee, but they do not necessarily follow the expressed preferences of their delegates (i.e. their teammates). The captain follows their own judgement on how best to advance their team's interest rather than attempting to reflect their teammates' views on what should be communicated to the referee.²⁶

So, the responsibilities of captaincy are of four types: valuational, decisional, motivational, and representational. What virtues are conducive to the execution of such responsibilities?

3. Captaincy Virtues

Drawing on the foregoing analysis of the principal responsibilities of captaincy, I now argue that two virtues are essential to rugby captaincy: 'sporting judgement' and 'responsibility'. I do not suggest that this constitutes an exhaustive list of captaincy virtues, but they are necessary for captaincy, other captaincy virtues are derivable from them, and, arguably, they are the most fundamental of the captaincy virtues given their close relationship to the principal responsibilities of captaincy.

a. Sporting Judgement

Decisionmaking is the most important responsibility of captaincy. Any action that a captain might inspire is of little value if their decisions are misguided from the outset. The decisions with which captains are charged in rugby require the exercise of 'sporting judgement'.²⁷ Judgement is an ability to deliberate rationally about action beyond what is captured in our ability to follow rules. Sporting judgement is that decisionmaking capacity as it pertains to sporting competition. Good sporting judgement is perhaps the principal captaincy virtue.²⁸

The decisions that captains face are underdetermined by the laws of the game, codes of conduct, data analytics, and playbooks. Captains require a particularistic grasp of the unique combination of factors that constitute the given situation. Consider the following decision scenario:

The captain's team (the 'Hawks') is awarded a penalty 8 minutes before the end of a match (against the 'Bears'). The penalty is 40 metres from the opposition's try line. The Hawks are trailing by 5 points. The captain's two best options are:

1. To kick for goal (3 points if successful) and then attempt to score again before the end of the match; or
2. To kick for the corner and try to score a try from the resulting lineout close to the opponents' try line (5 points and a further two points if the associated conversion is successful).

The Hawks have lost to the Bears on the three occasions that they have played in the last two years, including in one Grand Final where the Hawks led by 3 points until the final play of the game when the Bears scored a match-winning try. The captain notices that the Hawks are tiring physically, and the Bears are known to finish matches strongly. The penalty awarded to the Hawks lies at the outer boundary of their kicker's range, and the kicker has just received treatment for a minor knock to their kicking leg. The opposition have

had a player sin-binned on account of the foul play that precipitated the penalty, so they will play with only 14 players until the end of the match. The Hawks' hooker, who throws the ball into the lineout, is normally consistent, but they mis-threw against the Bears in the final play of last year's Grand Final and blames themselves for the defeat. The Hawks pride themselves on being an attacking team that plays try-scoring rugby rather than a team that relies on kicking points to win games. Dark clouds have formed and a heavy downpour of rain appears imminent.

There is no algorithm or principle to which the captain can appeal for definitive guidance in such a situation, even while narrowing the options to two. While data on kicking success rates, lineout success rates, or teammates' sprint speed can inform this decision, they cannot settle it. Good sporting judgement involves a clear perception of the full range of factors relevant to decision, how those factors interact, what can be brought about in the given context, and the likely implications of attempting to bring about one thing rather than another in that context.²⁹ In short, a captain of sporting judgement can discern the extent and relative merits of what might be achieved by the team, given the prevailing demands, constraints, and possibilities of that competitive context.

Several factors contribute to the irreducibility of judgement in such decisionmaking. Firstly, precepts do not apply themselves. In identifying the most choiceworthy decision, the captain must identify when particular instructions are applicable to the given situation. For example, a general attacking strategy may be to 'create space for outside backs through forwards clearing rucks with enough speed and efficiency to allow the ball to be recycled and distributed to outside channels faster than the opposition can recover the width of their defensive line'. While

a team may take to the field with a handful of rehearsed strike plays that instantiate this general strategy, they must identify the most opportune moments to deploy these plays, and they must work out how to implement the general strategy beyond strike plays.

Secondly, unanticipated circumstances can arise that cannot be subsumed by antecedent instructions. For example, the weather might unexpectedly change, multiple players may be sent off, or the referee may interpret the laws in an unexpected way. There is no formula to determine when a team should revert to 'Plan B'. Adaptability is required as a match unfolds, not the rigid application of a pre-determined set of instructions.

Thirdly, instructions may conflict. For example, leading up to a match, the team may be coached, and players selected, to exit from defensive zones by running the ball instead of kicking it. During a match, a coach may have a change of heart (perhaps a loss of nerve) and instruct that the ball be kicked to exit instead. The captain must then decide whether to follow the coach's new instruction (for which the team may be ill-prepared or ill-suited) or to stick with earlier instructions around which preparation and team selection had been organised.

Fourthly, the instantiation of instructions in the concrete cannot be determined without the exercise of judgement. Rules and principles prescribe action types of varying degrees of specificity. However, each act type can be instantiated by a variety of act tokens. There is always a 'gap' between precepts and action, however specific the precept.³⁰ Captains must determine which features of the situation are salient to deliberation in that particular context. The Hawks' captain may recognize, for example, that relevant to their decision are the facts that their team is tiring, the kicker may have an injured leg, it is about to rain, and time is

running out. The identification of salient considerations also involves the exclusion from deliberation of non-salient considerations.³¹ The captain should omit from their deliberations, for example, self-interested concerns such as what would best advance their personal performance metrics for the match or what would most impress a potential personal sponsor.

Fifthly, many tactical decisions cannot be taken in isolation from the team's playing philosophy, as such decisions often express an interpretation of those convictions. For example, whether a team should choose to kick at goal when awarded a penalty (for a possible three points) or to kick to the corner to set up a try from the ensuing lineout (for a possible seven points) depends to a significant degree on the team's fundamental strategic convictions.³²

Finally, the captain's deliberative task is not to individuate every available option and then to identify the most choiceworthy among them. The time-constrained nature of decisionmaking in a rugby match (and sporting competition generally) requires a kind of insight, the ability to 'zero-in' (Steinberger 2018, 63) almost instantly on the right (or at least a reasonable) course of action from among the available options.

For each of these six reasons, a captain's decisionmaking requires the virtue of sporting judgement.³³

b. Responsibility

The capacity to reach good decisions on behalf of the team is not enough, however. The captain must be willing to implement and defend those decisions. The second captaincy virtue is 'responsibility'.

Even if a captain's deliberations reliably deliver the right, or at least an appropriate, decision in a given sporting context, the captain must be willing to enact their decisions and be accountable for them. There is a distinction between *taking* and *enacting* a decision. To take a decision is for one's deliberations to deliver a conclusion about what should be done. By contrast, enacting a decision involves taking steps to execute that decision in the world. The captain must be willing to enact their decisions and to take responsibility for them. While they might consult with other members of the team – for example the attack leaders or kicker – they must ultimately take responsibility for those decisions.

Captains must take complex decisions quickly in highly pressurised situations, often while physically and emotionally exhausted. A captain's bad decisions can cost their team a match or even a season. Captaincy involves a heightened responsibility for the team's results and for one's individual decisions. Poor decisions, and poor results that follow those decisions, can elicit a wave of criticism and abuse. In spite of the pressure and the criticism that follows perceived errors, captains must retain a willingness to take decisions, to enact them, and to account for them.

Self-trust is an essential accessory virtue to responsibility if the captain is to avoid indecision, passing the task of decision to others, and the abnegation of responsibility for decisions following their enactment. In the absence of self-trust, it seems highly unlikely that a captain could reliably manifest responsibility. Like interpersonal trust, self-trust has motivational and competency components. A possessor of self-trust has confidence in their own motives and competencies relevant to the task about which they trust themselves, sometimes despite criticism. In the case of captaincy, they trust their competence to discharge well the four areas of responsibility and their motivation to prioritise the team's

interest, including the team's joint commitment to substantive winning over scoreboard winning.

Responsibility is possible only if they can maintain, in the face of error and criticism, a sense of their own basic competence and worth as a captain (Govier 1993, 103-104). To distrust oneself is to see oneself as 'ill-motivated, incompetent, and unable to act independently' (Ibid, 110). If a captain does not trust their own judgement, they will be swayed easily by the advice of others, they will consult others excessively, and they will equivocate in their decisions.

In addition to self-trust, responsibility also requires legitimacy. A captain can achieve little if they do not enjoy the support of teammates, if teammates are not willing to enact their instructions. Compliance that is achieved by threats or incentives is unlikely to sustain. Consequently, legitimacy is also a necessary pre-condition for responsibility – they must be recognised as an authority by their teammates.

However, captains in rugby are typically appointed by the coach, not chosen by their teammates. So, *prima facie*, they must overcome a legitimacy shortfall at the time of appointment. This presents a challenge whereby those to whom the captain will issue instructions have not consented to their captain's authority. Legitimacy may be achieved through a variety of means, however. Beyond the legitimacy conferred by merely occupying the role of captain, a captain's legitimacy may be grounded in, for example, respect, loyalty, persuasion, or trust. In each case, the effect is similar: teammates consider the captain to have the right to issue commands that they have a duty to obey. The captain's instructions are considered to be binding on their teammates simply in virtue of those instructions having been issued by them. If a captain's

decisions are to be enacted, the captain must be recognised as a legitimate authority.

Conclusion

The first aim of this paper is to initiate a philosophical discussion of leadership in sport. The neglect of leadership facilitates the growth of coaching creep. The examination of captaincy shines a light on what is lost as leadership ebbs from the playing field to the coaches' box.

I have argued that captaincy involves four principal types of responsibility: valuational, decisional, motivational, and representative. These responsibilities pose ethical, intellectual, and agential challenges that can be reliably met only with the exercise of specific captaincy virtues. The two most important captaincy virtues are sporting judgement and responsibility. These virtues constitute distinct athletic excellences. However, they are under threat in modern sport.

Important strategic decisions are increasingly assumed by coaches so that the captain's judgement is usurped. If we wish to protect the captaincy virtues and to address the crisis of leadership, the first remedial step is to resuscitate the role of captain. At a minimum, we must protect moments of in-game decisionmaking as occasions for athlete leadership. This may require the creation of more extensive laws to restrict in-game communication between players and coaches. For example, it may involve the replacement of team-appointed water carriers with neutral water-carriers appointed by the relevant competition authority to prevent messages being relayed to players during breaks in play. A more radical approach might even exclude coaches from areas where players gather during half-time and devolve substitution decisions from coaches to captains.

The distribution of captaincy responsibilities more widely across a team may be a challenge to captaincy but not to leadership as a sporting excellence, because the responsibilities of leadership remain in the hands of athletes. However, coaching creep poses an acute challenge to sporting excellence, because it transfers those excellence-engaging responsibilities to parties outside the arena of competition. Consequently, it supplants sporting excellence with managerial excellence.

The model of captaincy that I have described is, to borrow a distinction that Isaiah Berlin drew in a political context, a 'virtuoso' rather than 'visionary' form of leadership.³⁴ The virtuoso model of captaincy places a premium on sporting judgement. Virtuoso leaders are marked by their perceptiveness and adaptability to changing circumstances. Their imagination is anchored by a realistic appraisal of prevailing constraints and challenges. This contrasts with the visionary's unyielding desire (and sometimes even capacity) to bend the world to their image of how it ought to be. While the virtuoso responds with dexterity to changing circumstances, the visionary is uncompromising in their attempts to shape rather than respond to the world. While in sport the possible ends are more limited and the constraints on possible means more fixed, good sporting judgement shares with good political judgement the apprehension of the given situation in the fullness of its particularity. On my account, capable captains are highly responsive to circumstance and have a clear grasp of sporting reality. They have finely attuned 'antennae' (Berlin 1996) for the shifting challenges, constraints, and opportunities that arise in the life of their team. Such adaptability and pragmatism may be possible for captains who have an unwavering commitment to a particular goal or playing philosophy, but it would not allow a rigid conception of what *ought* to be to weaken their grasp of what *is*.

Leadership is a central athletic excellence in team sports. Efforts to erode its significance should be resisted, and measures should be instituted to elevate the degree to which leadership can be exercised by athletes. A first step towards the revival of athlete leadership is a proper appreciation of the character for captaincy.

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¹ In light of powerful objections to adversarial competition levelled by, among others, Kohn (1992).

² For example, Russell (1999).

³ For example, Hardman and Jones (2011) or Simon (2018).

⁴ For example, the literature on sportsmanship, such as Keating (1964) or Abad (2010).

⁵ Important contributions have been made in works aimed at a general audience, including Brearley (2015) and Walker (2017).

⁶ For a recent overview, see Cotterill and Fransen (2016).

⁷ Rugby union is a global game, played by 8.5 million people in 121 countries (World Rugby 2017).

⁸ The body which determines the laws of soccer is actively considering changes to expand the responsibilities of captaincy to align more closely with captaincy in rugby (International Football Association Board 2017).

⁹ An alternative approach to this character-based analysis would be to examine the characters of those who have captained successful teams and extrapolate character traits that are commonly held among them. For such a success-based approach, see Walker (2017). However, this approach does not distinguish between traits that are conducive to good captaincy from those developed by people in captaincy. Some traits that we associate with being in power may result from the experience of being in power rather than explain why one become powerful. Pfeffer (1992, 73) notes that 'often the characteristics that we believe to be sources of power [e.g. articulateness, extroversion, self-confidence etc.] are almost as plausibly the consequences of power instead' (Pfeffer 1992, 73). Moreover, a team's results are a poor measure against which to judge a captain's ability *qua* captain. A winning team can be so superior to their opponents that little hinges on the quality of captaincy. Conversely, a team can be so weak in relation to its opposition that even outstanding captaincy cannot bring about a winning results. So, we must look beyond mere results to assess the quality of captaincy.

¹⁰ This is to be distinguished from an *aretic* account of virtue by which the virtues are defined in terms of their tendency to allow the occupant of the role to flourish as a person in and through the role.

¹¹ This differs from many other types of leaders. For example, a military leader may order an air strike on an enemy, but they will not be involved in the execution of that order.

¹² A complete virtue ethical account of captaincy may require a prior account of the purpose of the sport and what aspect of human good that sport advances. See Oakley and Cocking (2001, ch. 3). To that extent, the account offered here is 'mid-level' as it assumes the responsibilities of the role absent an account of deeper normative underpinnings.

¹³ I leave open the possibility that substantive winning may be possible despite one's cheating to some degree. See Paul Gaffney's concept of 'playable cheating' (Gaffney 2018-19). Assuming that cheating necessarily involves rule-breaking, the playable cheating doctrine contradicts the 'logical incompatibility thesis'. According to that thesis, cheating precludes winning, because winning presupposes playing, and playing presupposes rule-following (Suits 2014, 26).

¹⁴ This is not to claim that the captain is the only player with responsibility for shaping the team's culture and animating values, but they have an *elevated* responsibility in this regard.

¹⁵ Such an alignment is also necessary with players who occupy non-captaincy leadership roles within a team. In rugby, this is most evident in the relationship between the coach and the out-half. The out-half is a crucial decisionmaking position, akin to a quarter-back in American football.

¹⁶ Though this decision may be dictated in advance by the coaching staff.

¹⁷ Examples of captains executing this motivational responsibility are evident in clips involving British and Irish Lions captains Martin Johnson (The British and Irish Lions 2020, 1:45-3:35), Paul O'Connell (The British and Irish Lions 2016b), and Alun Wyn Jones (The British and Irish Lions 2016a).

¹⁸ Occasions may arise in which a player would best serve their team by avoiding risk. For example, in order to avoid injury or to reduce the risk of committing an offence that would result in a sanction from which the team would likely concede points. However, there are many circumstances in which one can best serve the team by assuming avoidable risk, for example, in the execution of a dominant tackle that drives the opponent backwards or in contesting the ball at the breakdown following a tackle.

¹⁹ Consider, for example, English captain Martin Johnson's decision not to speak to his team as they were about to take to the field for the men's Rugby World Cup Final in 2003 (Rugbypass Official 2019, 2:10-3:37).

²⁰ An 'individualised' approach to ethics in political leadership, which is contextualist as opposed to morally subjectivist, has been developed by Mark Philp (e.g. Philp 2010). This approach emphasises that the evaluation of individual political leaders should be sensitive to their particular capacities and the specific constraints on their agency at the point of decision. One such constraint is how the leader is viewed by those they lead: "Since the development and implementation of political decisions depends on carrying people with you, the variability of people's reactions to those who attempt to lead them will play an important role in determining what it is possible for any particular politician to do – thereby necessarily individualizing the answer to 'what should X do in a given context'" (Philp 2010, 469).

²¹ This idea of 'acting together' draws from Gilbert (2013, p. 34).

²² Examples of captains executing this spokesperson role are evident in clips involving England women's captain, Sarah Hunter, (Irish Rugby TV 2016) and New Zealand men's captain, Kieran Read (World Rugby 2019).

²³ This advocatorial aspect of captaincy is exemplified by Irish men's captain Rory Best's discussion with the referee concerning purported illegal tackles committed on Irish out-half Jonathan Sexton. See Cumiskey (2017). Subtle advocacy was also evident in British and Irish Lions captain Sam Warburton's intervention in the final moments of the final test between the Lions and New Zealand in 2017. Warburton's interventions were arguably delaying tactics to encourage the referee to pause and reconsider his initial decision. For a clip of the incident, see Rugby365.com (2017), and for an analysis, see Goile (2017).

²⁴ This lawyerly role is so important that it formed the (at least the publicly stated) basis for coach Warren Gatland selecting Sam Warburton as British and Irish Lions Captain in 2013. See Rees (2013).

²⁵ The distinction between 'trustee' and 'delegate' models of representation is discussed in Hannah Pitkin (1967). The trustee model of parliamentary representation was famously defended by Edmund Burke in his 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol' (1774).

²⁶ Indeed, given the speed at which decisions must be made and the context-sensitive nature of these decisions, it would be difficult to implement a pure delegate model of in-game representation in rugby.

²⁷ The type of judgement at issue here is a form of 'practical judgement'. Practical judgement is oriented towards action. Following Aristotle, this is to be distinguished from 'theoretical judgement', which is concerned with matters of truth and knowledge.

²⁸ For a view that judgement is the preeminent virtue in all leadership contexts, see Keohane (2005, 710).

²⁹ As Isaiah Berlin notes with regard to political judgement '[judgement] involves an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what' (Berlin 1996).

³⁰ As Onora O'Neill argues, 'we can formulate definite descriptions...but in doing so we do not point to particulars, however much information we tuck into the act description' (O'Neill 2018, 119).

³¹ In the context of political judgement, Isaiah Berlin notes that good judgement involves a 'highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest' (Berlin 1996).

³² England men's captain, Chris Robshaw, was heavily criticised when England failed to score after electing to take the more risky, but potentially more rewarding, option of kicking for the corner to set up a try rather than kicking for goal in a pivotal moment during England's World Cup match against

Wales in 2015. See Mairs (2015). However, the evaluation of individual tactical decisions should not be purely consequentialist. In addition to point-scoring concerns, evaluation should consider at least whether the decision cohered with the team's playing philosophy.

³³ How sporting judgement is acquired, its relationship to rationality, and how to discern good from bad sporting judgement are questions that require further attention but cannot be taken up here.

³⁴ For an excellent discussion of this distinction in Berlin, see Cherniss (2018, ch. 12). This distinction is implicit in Berlin's comparisons of Franklin D. Roosevelt with Winston Churchill (Berlin 1949) and Woodrow Wilson (Berlin 1998).

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