**Where life imitates sport**

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER:   
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**If sport is to be a metaphor for life, what are we to make of professional athletes' bad behaviour on the sporting field?**

THERE is something about the French, football and philosophy. It all starts with Albert Camus, arguably the greatest of the 20th century *philosophes*.

As a young man, Camus played goalkeeper for his university team in Algeria. The experience made a lasting impression. "Everything I know about morality and the obligations of men," Camus would later say, "I owe to football."

The footballer-philosopher has since become a rich French tradition. One is reminded, for example, of Eric Cantona, the sublimely gifted yet troubled midfielder who played for Manchester United and France.

At a press conference in 1995, shortly after he infamously kung-fu kicked a heckling spectator in the head, Cantona solemnly intoned: "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea." Indeed.

Many were pinning high hopes, then, last week on Frenchman Thierry Henry (many Australians will know him best from Gillette razor advertisements on TV). For, like Cantona, Henry had just had his moment of disgrace on the football pitch.

In the dying minutes of a World Cup qualifying play-off between France and Ireland, Henry brazenly handled the ball, before passing it on to a team-mate for the winning French goal. The referee missed the infringement and Henry joined his team in celebrating their win.

Alas, for the romantics, there was no aphorism about seagulls after the match; just an apology from a football superstar no doubt worried about the loss of sponsors' endorsements. Impassioned Irish demands for a replayed match amounted, in the end, to nought.

Few will dispute that a replay might have offered the most just remedy.

Yet if we regard sport as indeed a metaphor for life, doesn't this mean that we must put up with injustice? Doesn't merde happen?

You might say that the lesson in the Henry affair is that sometimes we have to accept that people make mistakes, and take our bad fortune with good grace. The Irish might be justifiably enraged but *c'est la vie.*

This will be an unsatisfactory conclusion for many. Sport, one may argue, is a metaphor not for life's vicissitudes and treachery, but for how life should be governed by certain rules of conduct.

In this sense, sport involves what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre would refer to as a practice: the performance of a particular activity, through which virtue can be can be exhibited. Caressing a half-volley through the covers in cricket or coolly slotting the ball into the back of the net in football may be marginal to everyday life, but such acts of athletic performance embody a standard of excellence.

During the golden age of amateurism such excellence and fair play on the sporting field were regarded as an extension of one's individual character.

Today, however, the relentless commercialisation of sport has meant that virtue is now a commodity to be ruthlessly exploited by athletes.

It is less the love of the game and more the desire to attract and keep lucrative sponsors that now motivates professional athletes to behave well. Henry's lapse highlights this all too sadly.

He may be the public face of Gillette, but Henry is far from being "the best a man can get".

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* [*philosophercolumn@gmail.com*](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)

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