SIX

LEVEL PLAYING FIELDS

'It is the flatness of the stage that makes choreography probable, just as it is the flatness of the stadium that increases the probability of athletics.'

Bernard Cache, 1995[1]

The 'level playing field' is a recent phrase, used first in the U.S. in the 1970s to indicate fair dealing. The analogy needed no explanation. By the 1970s the modernization of sports was already far advanced, symbolized by its topographic standardization but marked also by a broader process of regulation controlling the rules, tools and behaviour of games. The sites of sport were typically separated from the natural landscape and regarded as perhaps the most extreme examples of the reduction of space to geometry associated with the image of modernity. Times and distances were measured with great precision, and the spatiality of sport assumed an isotropic surface – in which physical properties have the same measure in every direction – much like the conditions required of a 'flat' universe.[2] Modern sports are also highly repetitive in their elements, taking the spectator to the edge of monotony by requiring that the fundamental conditions be the same in each iteration. Think of the performance of the serve in tennis.

Venues for pre-modern games lacked almost all of the regulatory and standardizing features that characterize modern sport. The most obvious exceptions were the ceremonial plazas of the Pre-Columbian Americas used for the ball game and the carefully designed arenas and stadiums of the geometry-obsessed ancient Greeks and their Roman imitators. Even these lacked the standardization of surfaces

and compliance codes found in the modern era. Most often, before the nineteenth century, sports were played on agricultural fields or pastures, existing tracks or the streets of towns, without clear spatial boundaries and without a clear distinction between players and spectators. Little was done to ensure the playing surface was level. This shift is sometimes explained as part of modernization and globalization, but it had also to do with concepts of time and the idea of 'leisure' and with the commercial opportunities that came to be seen in this new area of discretionary spending.

On an international scale, the process of spatial and temporal quantification in sport began to become intense only in the late nineteenth century. It occurred in a period of high imperialism, when European colonialism brought 'modern sports' to many parts of the world and used them to teach doctrines of fair play and hence equality, parallel to the doctrine that all peoples were equal in God's sight – ideas which ultimately helped undermine claims of Western superiority and justifications of empire. Colonized peoples embraced these new sports enthusiastically, whenever given the chance, and quickly began to appear in international competitions, delighting in defeating their imperial masters even before decolonization.[3]

Standardization stemmed both from a political desire for social control and from a growing impulse to measure and compare. World records could only be taken seriously if contests were equal. Sport became a source of national as well as individual pride and identity, and a significant element in the global economy. Increasingly sophisticated technologies were applied to improving the performance of sportspeople and the surfaces on which they performed, not least the level playing field. Ironically, the levelling and standardization of sport facilitated the ranking of performers and their allocation to subsets of skill and achievement. Increasingly such rankings served to focus attention on the very small number of individuals or teams that made it to the top. The rankings were used in turn to determine pay scales, with international stars earning immense prizes and the vast majority missing out. Thus the precision applied to the levelling of playing fields and the measurement of performance enabled the construction of new forms of

inequality. It was the conquest of celebrity over the rough democracy of sport played on a beach or in a cow paddock.

The competitive aspect of sport in its modern form made it an ideal subject for economic analysis. Beginning around the time games became modernized and commercialized, in the 1970s economists began to consider the implications of sport for the understanding of markets, competition and optimality. The 'received theory' was that 'the perfect game is a symbiotic contest between equal opponents'. It was also assumed that sports fans preferred to see balanced competition, to conform to the 'uncertainty of outcome hypothesis'. A close finish indicated perfect competition. In fact, it has been shown that the audience for sport enjoys dominance, in which differences in market power – to buy players for teams – lead to imperfect competition.

Particularly in the contemporary market for media rights, in which revenue is not closely tied to place or 'home team loyalties', equality between teams in a league is not necessary to achieving optimal returns.[4] The vast amounts of money involved often prove tempting to officials and players, upsetting equity in the location of competitions and the fixing of matches. Thus in 2015 when FIFA (the International Federation of Association Football) officials were arrested in New York under charges of bribery and corruption, the director of the FBI declared that by their actions 'That field that is so famously flat was made tilted in favour of those looking to gain.'[5] Occasionally tampering with the actual playing surface is used to advantage one team or player over another, when money or glory is at stake.

Running, walking, swimming

It is striking that some of the first known efforts to ensure equality in sports performances came from the Greeks, with their intense concern for measurement and relatively advanced understanding of cosmology, notably the relationship between line and circle. Their democratic impulse might also seem to parallel the notion of sporting fairness, though paradoxically – Greek democracy was

revolutionary but incomplete and flourished within the heart of a slave society, which helped create the leisure time essential to the development of games.

For the Greeks, standardization seems chiefly to have meant the measurement of length and control of the start in running races. The stadia they constructed were often located in natural valleys, so that the zone of competition could be on level land surrounded by banked terraces. They mirrored amphitheatres created for the performance of drama. Originally a religious structure, dating to the sixth century BCE, the ancient Greek stadium was the stage for athletic contests: foot races of varying lengths, wrestling and boxing, and the pentathlon (discus, javelin, long jump, wrestling and a foot race one length of the stadium). In its earliest form, the ancient stadium was typically a flat, rectangular space 163 metres long and 15 to 30 metres wide, bordered by earth embankments for spectators to stand or sit on.

The evidence is limited, but archaeological excavations show that tracks were made of hard-packed clay or a composition of clay and sand, and were fairly smooth, with a gentle slope of around 0.5 per cent. The terraces dug out of the bordering ground for standing spectators – up to 50,000 of them – were also quite flat. Standardization was applied to the lengths of the ancient Greek stadia: they were by definition 600 feet (183 metres) long but the ancient foot was not itself standardized, varying from place to place and over time. With a range of perhaps 0.278 to 0.32 metres for the foot, the stadium could stretch from 166.8 to 192 metres. These variations mattered little, however, because it was the winning of the race that was celebrated, not the time.

What the Greeks took most seriously was ensuring that runners covered the same distance and started at the same time. The start was controlled by the use of gates, opened (almost) simultaneously by the starter. The distance covered was standardized in the shortest race – the *stadion*, one length of the field – simply by having the runners compete in marked lanes. The longer foot races all required turns around a pillar, and thus the distance covered by a runner varied with his position at the starting line. Here the Greeks applied