‘Science Slam’ and sportification processes in science

Bo Carlsson

To cite this article: Bo Carlsson (2019) ‘Science Slam’ and sportification processes in science, Sport in Society, 22:9, 1623-1637, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2018.1435030

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1435030

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 12 Feb 2018.

Article views: 394
‘Science Slam’ and sportification processes in science

Bo Carlsson

Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden; Department of Sport Science, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Sport’s relation to society could be grasped in its connection to science. Thus, there seem to exist two parallel processes: the scientification of sport and the sportification of science. Undoubtedly, science has become an important part in the development of sport, particularly in elite sport. As regards the relation between science and sport, an opposite trend has also been observed, in which sport logic influences the (popular) presentation of science. In this respect, this essay talks about the ‘sportification of science’ by making reference to ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’.

Introduction

At the outset, ‘sportification processes in science’ might suggest a text that will deal with the present ‘peer-review-publication fervour’ – or fever – in academia, in which (a) various journals, through (rather shady) impact factors and journal indexing (cf. Wagner 2016) struggle to become the top journal in the field; (b) different academic scholars try eagerly and loyally to be included on the premier list of top-notch scientists by receiving a significant number of quotations in distinguished journals; and (c) assorted universities operate to become most excellent at the top level in the most prestigious ranking systems. To a considerable extent, these more or less standardized and routinized measurements and the institutionalization of ‘leagues’ and merits do indeed have, in a Guttmannian sense, a striking resemblance with (modern) sport (logics) in several respects.1

Albeit being an interesting as well as a challenging subject, the present essay will not handle the current publication strategies and the battles of recognition and its tracks, arenas or competitors. Instead, the focus will be on the current progress of popular phenomena in science which use the forms of sport, such as ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’. This primary test will be a method for comprehending, rather differently, the magnitude of Sport in Society, as basic impacts, as a world view, for both the ‘eventification’ and the sportification of cultures … (and humans).
Background: sport’s impact, projected … and beyond

Sport is supposed to supply society with added values, such as public health, socialization, integration and democracy, as well as economic growth and national pride (cf. Brukner, Kahn, and Kron 2004; Harris and Parker 2009; Porter and Smith 2004; Schimmel and Nauright 2005). Without doubt, we find numerous reports from sport organizations, as well as studies conducted by sport academics, that support this statement, thesis or assumption. Yet, these values are normatively founded and, regularly, ideologically shaped (Carlsson and Hedenborg 2014). Accordingly, this position has to be empirically challenged and tested (Coakley and Pike 2009). In contrast to the asserted good virtues of sport(s), other researchers, in the discipline of sport science, have argued that sports generate, for instance, exclusion, violence, body fixation, homophobia and nationalism (cf. Brackenridge 2002; Collins and Kay 2002; Jamieson and Orr 2009; Tamburrini and Tännö 2000). Consequently, sport’s impact on society is more crucial – and problematic – than its praised contribution to health, identity, integration and economic growth. Still, simultaneously, it should not – even in light of this criticism – be possible to disregard a possible social contribution by simply arguing about sport’s negative aspects. As mentioned, sport’s negative or positive impact on society is ultimately an empirical subject (Coakley and Pike 2009).

Regardless of this reflective and moderating departure, the following essay has the paradoxical ambition to highlight sport’s impact on society – in a radically different manner, however. In this respect, the essay will argue that sport, in a broader sense, has a marked impact on our world views, perspectives and concepts, including speed (Tomlinson 2007), competitions or time and space (Connor 2011). Still, research on sport usually focuses on its added values in society; e.g. its instrumental impact on everyday life. Additionally, there are several studies dealing with society’s influence on the development of sport. Despite fruitful and critical reasoning, these analyses seldom contain reflections on sport’s existential impact on society as a world view influencing ordinary life, popular culture and society at large beyond various studies related to sport’s added value.2

In comparison, science has by tradition not normally been forced to pose added value beyond a general appeal to science as reason – and enlightenment. Science has had the authority and legitimacy as science – and as reason – and there are no obvious needs or motives to add external values to its impact in and on society.3 Still, applied sciences in particular have increasingly become measured by their instrumental value. In this respect, science is discussed in light of, e.g. public health, the struggle against cancer, as well as crime prevention and environmental protection. In spite of this increasing instrumental attitude, the impact of science is not, in comparison with sport, dialectically challenged by its antithesis, i.e. illness and injuries. Still, science’s impacts are to be empirically tested, verified or falsified in an endless process (cf. Popper 2002). Despite this empirical request, science as such has per definition no need to be reinforced by added values. Science has a value in itself based on reason. However, we will detect minor modifications of this position in light of the reasoning in this essay.

Thus, in the wake of the current ambition to popularize science, sciences are regularly related to and measured publicly by their societal relevance and popular comprehensibility. Naturally, the trend to popularize science has gradually acknowledged and utilized the logic of popular culture. As mentioned, this development is a critical starting point for our reasoning. However, in order to make this original reflection, we have to make a
brief excursus by presenting one of sport’s possible positions in popular culture and in the entertainment industry as such.

**Excursus: sport is blended into popular culture, as well as into society**

It is obvious that in contemporary society we find various forms of entertainment – and of popular culture – that include a range of resemblances with sport or the conception of sport competition, at least in light of Allen Guttmann’s conceptualization of sport. Digital sport, or eSport, for instance, might hence be understood with reference to this conceptualization of sport and its character (cf. Jonasson and Thiborg 2011, Thiborg 2011), regardless of additional distinctions.

In a similar manner, ‘Idol’, ‘Top Model’ and, particularly, other docusoaps like ‘Expedition Robinson’ (‘Survivor’) contain resemblances with sport. They are broadcasted as well as marketed on the basis of elimination and the selection of a winner through various steps of elimination camps and competitions. Consequently, regardless of other forms of drama logics, the ‘shows’ build on various forms that might be regarded as comparable to sport logic and the sportification process and could thereby be understood as comprising the wake of a general sportification process in popular culture. In a similar manner, other forms of logics in the entertainment industry, fashioning popular culture, seem to influence sport more and more. The mushrooming of various exhibition games could, accordingly, be recognized in the light of this development, transforming sport from game/competition to event. Besides, the rising use of interviews of athletes, *during* competition, is copied from other forms of entertainment (Carlsson and Svensson 2015), such as ‘Masterchef’. Hence, the traditional conceptualization of sport and the sportification of sport might gain, in a postmodern society, by additional characteristics like ‘events’ as a supplement to, e.g. Guttmann’s standard concepts (Carlsson and Svensson 2015, cf. Guttmann 2004).

Besides, ‘Masterchef’ as a case study sheds light on the development of popular culture and popular entertainment following sport logics, such as formal and moulded time, standardization, evaluation, results (Carlsson and Svensson 2015). Furthermore, in ‘Masterchef’, we find contests resembling those of quarterfinals, semifinals and finals (Carlsson and Svensson 2015). The interviews with the cooks – the contestants – emphasize their competitive character, fairness and respect for their opponents. This particular interview practice used during the contests – in these competitive settings – has, as mentioned, become part of broadcasting sport due to its entertaining and passionate elements (Carlsson and Svensson 2015). Without doubt, in Masterchef we find, regardless of differences, a considerable number of characteristics that could be understood by Guttmann’s (2004) conceptualization of sport, which in turn could be perceived as a sportification process of popular culture.

This excursus has so far endeavoured to grasp the amalgamation of the forms of modern sports competition and popular culture as an entertainment industry and to highlight differences and similarities as well as mutual influences. One might ask, critically, whether the drafted scenario really constitutes a problem. No, it would probably not be a huge problem, if this mixture and confusion of rationalization and trivialization, as well as the sportification process, were only directed towards popular culture. We would, most likely, survive as the ‘enlightened civilization’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997), due to the ‘imaginary settings’ of sport and the entertainment circus (Elias and Dunning 1986).
Still, when this ‘sporting’ and entertaining attitude and world view intrudes into other social spheres, such as law – or even science – we will most likely face a more crucial problem. As a matter of fact, there are similarities between sport and law, particularly when the law works as dispute resolution (Carlsson 2014). Both sport and law originate from ‘play’, according to Huizinga’s thesis (2004), as well as from serious legal anthropological findings (Barton 1969; Llewellyn and Hoebel 1941, cf. Carlsson 2014).

Notwithstanding these observations, it is still difficult to argue that the law has become ‘sportified’ due to the increasing interaction with sport, particularly commercial sport. Yet, it is possible to trace an atmosphere of confusion (Carlsson 2014), in sport as well as in law, regarding their mutual impact. It has been asserted, predominately by sport evangelists, that sport will be distorted by the interference of law (Grayson 1994). Similarly, it has been claimed that law will be ‘trivialized’ (or perhaps sportified) by closer intervention in popular culture (as in sport) ‘when law goes pop’ (Sherwin 2000).

However, is it possible to discover a parallel development in science, in which sport – in a broad sense – modifies its practice?

Formulating the subject: science as sport …

The context of the study has now been settled after the initial reflection on sport’s uncertain impact on society and this short excursus into popular culture and its ‘sportification process’. It is hence time for the genuine target of this essay. We can thus frankly formulate the issue in this manner: What about science, and sport’s influence on academia?

From my current critical horizon – and in light of medical science’s ‘colonization’ of social science – the pursuits of impact factors and the development of various biometrical measurements and evaluations seem to be moulded by a rationality that has a significant resemblance to several elements in sport logic and in the sportification process, with the emphasis on tools for standardized measurements and rankings of journals as well as of best universities. Consequently, scientific journals are competing on this rule-governed arena, and university value systems and merits are formed and measured according to this (sport) logic (Wagner 2016, cf. Guttmann 2004). Obviously, it is hard to understand this transformation of (social) science in connection with ‘reason’ without a reference to the ‘sporting attitude’ in our present society. Still, notwithstanding its potential, ‘biometrical tournaments’ or ‘impact competition’ will not, as mentioned, become the target in the reflection and analysis of this study. Because, in addition to these rationalistic trends in academia, it is also possible to observe an inducing and triggering ‘sportification process’ in science through, for instance, ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’, which is challenging with regard to logics and rationality in science.5

Regardless of the values of enlarging democracy and popular awareness in science (cf. Kitcher 2003), the present study – and its application – will make a reflective and critical examination by initially scrutinizing and analysing the progress of ‘Science Slam’, and particularly of ‘Grand Prix in Science’, which appears to grow to become a regular and popular competition within the academy. The analysis will shed lights on differences and, particularly, on the similarities between sport and science. It will consequently be conducted in relation to the thesis and the logics of the ‘sportification process’.

In sum, science’s influence on sport has been tremendous. It is hard to imagine the development of sport – with regard to performances as well as organization – without the impact
of sports medicine, sport technology, as well as of sport psychology and sport management. The ‘scientification’ of sport is, thus, fairly obvious and profound. In contrast, is it possible to spot a reverse imprint? In other words, might sport and its logics of competition as well as the sportification processes have a significant effect on the image and the standards of the scientific community?

As revealed, the reflection in the essay will focus on the development of trends and phenomena at the universities, such as ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’, with a view to describing and analysing a number of problems, limits, challenges and possibilities with regard to the image and brand of contemporary science in relation to the phenomenology of science as well as to modern sport and sports competition. Consequently, by relating this phenomenon to the logic of sport, in a broader perception of the concept, the development and the values of science in contemporary society will be primarily tested and critically scrutinized.

To emphasize, the essay will grasp the problem by theoretical reasoning as well as by some minor empirical findings. The theoretical discussion will, in some sense, have a Guttmannian horizon inspired by a system-theoretical approach towards differences and similarities in sport and sciences (Luhmann 1996, 2008). The succeeding reasoning will roughly focus on the content and logic in ‘Grand Prix in Science’ in light of ‘the thesis of a sportification process in society’ in an attempt to illuminate differences and similarities in sport and science. In addition, some empirical findings will describe and analyse competition in science by highlighting, for instance, ‘the result’, in accordance with ‘the record’ in sport. Thus, the study will briefly present a competitor’s (a scientist’s) and a coach’s experiences and motives in relation to the performance, the talents, the preparation and the training. This will be done by referring to positions and world views in sport.

**The actual subject: some preliminary observations**

The following message from the Dean of the Faculty was delivered to the staff’s email boxes (in May 2015):

Science Slam at the University!

Do you get the point? Is the research description entertaining, clear and apposite? There are a few things you should consider when you take part in selecting the best team at the Faculty in oral presentation. Come to the Faculty’s first science slam, on May 14 at 17 o’clock in room C127, for an easy-going clash between the departments’ smartest researchers. The challenge is for the teams to present their research in the best way in just a few minutes. Welcome to two or three pleasant hours to get an insight into what our colleagues are doing and then socialize over a light meal. Regards, the Dean.

Of course, the Sport Science Department runs into this challenge triumphantly by sending its young talents to this competition, and the team’s appointed coach, eager to receive fans and support, promotes the event by an eMail: ‘I would like to remind you about Science Slam … Sign up and yell for the Sport Science Team … Do we have some running cheers? The coach.’

In a similar manner, ‘Grand Prix in Science’ is launched as a national competition, in which scientists are, in a very restricted time, supposed to present their research in as captivating, inspiring and pedagogical manner as possible. The national competition consists of a number of local qualification rounds. Malmö University participated, and their local qualifications took place at St Petri College on 26 September 2015. During four minutes,
the competitors – the scientists – were obliged to take part in the contest by ‘peaking’ the presentation of their research (which was not necessarily the best research). The winner was to be chosen by a jury (50/50) of students and academic experts. The finals were held in Stockholm on 25 November 2015.

‘Grand Prix in Science’ is, as a matter of fact, supported by the journal ‘Forskning & Framsteg’ [Research and Progress], its partners including the Swedish Research Council [Vetenskapsrådet], the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems [VINNOVA], the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning [FORMAS] and the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare [FORTE], which are all important research councils in Sweden, forming the establishment of Swedish science.

A brief communication took place between a scientist and a science reporter, initiated by the scientist’s scepticism towards the event:

The reporter/journalist: ‘I don’t agree. Doubtlessly, the forms might be discussed, and individuals need not like to compete. But science is also about presenting the research to an audience outside the inner circle. If we are lucky we will make more individuals interested in higher education by showing the possibility of doing research in different special subjects. Besides, it is good training for the scientist in making oral presentations and focusing on the core of the analysis’.

My response, as a traditional scientist: ‘Science is about deepening the analysis, contextualizing the findings and treating [in Latin, disserere] a problematic issue. It will become a problem if science grows to become part of the general media noise and if scientists have to bank on participation in the competition for public attention by participating in the general “speedification” of discussions and their entertaining logic’.

Without doubt, these observations and reflections highlight a crucial and interesting research question which relates to the values and logics of science and its imaginable transition or adaptation in contemporary society. The question is: Who are the winners and the losers, or could there be a tie, a draw? Perhaps, practically, it is not even a test, or a play? In the following, I will treat this critical issue by two theoretical departures as well as by two interviews with participants in these competition forms.

Theoretical reflections

A theoretical understanding of the subject could emerge in the wake of a Weberian tradition by mingling (1) Allen Guttmann’s analysis of the sportification process with (2) Luhmann’s system-theoretical departure. To put it briefly.

The concept of sport and the thesis of sportification (post-Guttmann)

In sport sciences, and particularly in the philosophy of sport, a number of serious attempts have been made to capture and conceptualize the essence of sport. They may include a pragmatic attempt: ‘Sport is what the actors, sport media and the spectators consider it to be’ (Jönsson 2008). Another more academic definition states: ‘Sport is an institutionalized – organized – competitive activity that requires extensive physical efforts or complex physical skills’ (Coakley and Pike 2009). Further, ‘these actions are conducted by various contestants who are motivated by internal or external rewards’ (Coakley and Pike 2009). In
addition, Norbert Elias, notably, conceives sport as a ‘mimetic battle’ (Elias and Dunning 1986), as a struggle in an imaginary setting. Eric Dunning (1999), following Elias, argues that it is essential to have a developmental approach in order to comprehend the characteristics of sport. In a philosophical investigation, Mikael Lindfelt (1998) presented a phenomenological description of sport in which he argues that equality and fairness are two phenomenological dimensions that constitute the character of sport in addition to the principles of competition and rivalry.

In all, the focus on competition appears to be essential. Still, is competition enough to declare an activity as sport? No, of course not! In most descriptions of the phenomenology of sport, we find the concepts of ‘competition and rivalry’ as well as ‘fairness and equality’ (Lindfelt 1998). Yet, the efforts to declare and announce a winner seem to be central to modern sport. Ideally, the result has, however, to be obtained in a proper and fair manner. In this respect, the ethical values of equality and fairness are purely functional imperatives for constructing a competition involving tension and uncertainty (Lindfelt 1998; Loland 2002). In this respect, unpredictability – i.e. ‘the sweet tension of the uncertainty of outcome’ – stands out as an indispensable factor in the conceptualization of sport (Loland 2002).

This leads to the tricky question: Does sport presuppose physical activity, and if so, what is to be regarded as a sober and definitely physical activity? Evidently, in some sports such as casting, dart, (digital) motor sport, curling and bowling, the degree of physical activity or physical skills could be discussed and perhaps even compared to intensive cooking or, more obviously, to carpeting and gardening. Hence, there are plenty of analyses of, e.g. eSport in light of Elias’ concept of the sportification process as well as Guttmann’s typology of modern sport, arguing that there are distinctive similarities between computer games like ‘Counterstrike’ (CS) and modern sport. In this context, virtuality is, for example, tested as a possible characteristic of (post)modern sport (Jonasson and Thiborg 2011).

Indisputably, the best known and most formalized attempt to describe and categorize modern sport and its developmental phases is probably Allen Guttmann’s (2004) contribution. In order to map the development towards modern sport, Guttmann introduced into the Weberian tradition several typologies and categories as a way of grasping the elements of this developmental process. Guttmann’s Weberian typologization of modern sport will be productive in our scrutinizing strategy. His major intention was to distinguish modern sport from other forms of play and physical activity. In his review, Guttmann distinguished seven characteristics located in the progress of modern sport and its sportification. Without doubt, all societies have included ‘playing’, and they have played according to stipulated, but solid, rules. In addition, sport is differentiated from play because of its emphasis on competition. What distinguishes our society and the progress of modern sport is that playing has been transformed via a sportification process which includes secularization, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization, quantification and the striving for records.

Still, we have, naturally, to acknowledge that these typologies were produced at an early phase of the transition process. Since then, sport has been profoundly influenced and marked by the process of, e.g. commercialization, urbanization, technologization, globalization, medialization and juridification. During this process, it has become increasingly involved in and adapted to the entertainment industry. Evidently, this development has had an impact on our understanding and typologization of contemporary sport. Guttmann’s categorization from the 1970s has to be revitalized and expanded by a novel category, a characteristic that Guttmann actually observed but rather noted as a threat to the purity of sport. In his view,
athletes infringe on the code of sports when they try to draw attention by entertaining the audience beyond the pure performance. In this perspective, paying attention to the aspect of amusement in a sport context is to focus on trivialities. Still, sport as an entertainment industry has progressed and turned in different directions. In this respect, entertainment is an important characteristic in contemporary (post)modern sport. In the prolongation of this reasoning we have to define the surplus character of entertainment and event.

Doubtlessly, in light of Guttmann’s typologies there are considerable differences between sport and science, but at the same time we find similarities, such as secularity (obviously, in science/reason), equality, specialization, and some striving for ‘records’, in the form of results; e.g. ‘better arguments’. Albeit inspiring, Guttmann’s categorization of modern sport is unfortunately not the best method to grasp the similarities between sport and science.

However, if we radically extend Guttmann’s categories of modern sport with the eventification process, we will observe resemblances between spectator sport and the popularization of science. In this respect, performances should also be entertaining, in addition to reason (science) or victory (sport).

**The problems of similarities and differences in science and sport (as systems)**

There have been definite attempts to describe the similarities between sport and science (Jonasson 2013, 2014; Loland 2002). First of all, history, as well as contemporary science, has been formed by competition – from Thomas Alva Edison’s victory to the Nobel Prize in chemistry, medicine, physics or economics. Competitions in rhetoric were praised among the ancient Greeks and still are in contemporary academia. In some sense, these contests are the seeds of ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’, in addition to the general sporting attitude in society. Still, regardless of the competitive elements, these premature competitive settings could not be compared to modern forms and organizations of sports competition or to the sportification process.

Testing, in particular, has been highlighted as matching logics in sport and science, like trial heats and lab tests, respectively. In addition, the logic of exclusion and inclusion similarly matches sport and science, as do evaluating and grading. Positivism includes a quantification process which is similar to the practice of sport. Besides, the ancient Olympic values of *citius, altius, fortius* form part of the logics of applied sciences, as well as of modern sport. Both systems contain elements ranging from formal rules and codes of honour to authenticating fairness and proper conduct. Despite this regulation, we will find various forms of cheating, with the crucial difference, however, that cheating might be included in ‘the ethos of the game’ in sport (D’Agostino 1981; Lindfelt 1998; Loland 2002, cf. Fraleigh 1982) and not in science, *per definition*. Both systems support careers based on ‘competitive balance’. Furthermore, sport has been described metaphorically as a ‘laboratory’ or ‘lab’ (Jonasson 2014, cf. Latour and Woolgar 1986).

The impact of science on sport, as mentioned earlier, has gradually become extensive. In light of technical development and equipment, this relation has, however, been discussed – and questioned – with reference to ideals of ‘natural training’ in contrast to training based on fitness machines (Svensson 2014, 2016). There is an implicit paradox implying that the involvement of natural science in sport leads to sport becoming less natural. Without doubt, the relation – with regard to impact, differences and similarities – between sport and science is interesting as well as complex.
At the end of the day, to *compete* is an ordinary ingredient of science, its history and logic. Still, this innate part might be converted into the logic of modern sport when science is transformed into the *forms of competition and sport events*. In order to theoretically scrutinize this problem, the study will take a departure in Niklas Luhmann’s system theory (1996, 2008) to enable grasping the problems of different systems’ cognitive openness as well as their normative closure and existing ‘thematization thresholds’. By such an approach it will become possible, through empirical studies, to analyse and clarify the phenomenology of sport and science as well as the current images and representations of the two fields. In this respect, the analysis will initially work with and test various postulated distinctions and correspondences (see Table 1) in the practice of science, as presented in, e.g. ‘Science Slam’ or ‘Grand Prix in Science’.

These are initially postulated differences and similarities between science and sport. In what respects are organized competitions and events *in science* related to these logics and rationalities? Do we need to understand science in a new and different way through its representations, or will science cope with the influence from modern sport (and popular culture)? What are the researchers’/competitors’ experiences, motives and talents as well as the training and preparations for these events? Some of these questions will be handled below in the empirical findings.

**Initial empirical findings: ‘Grand Prix in Science’**

The significant material presented in this part was assembled through interviews with a limited number of competitors (scientists) and ‘coaches’ (from the university).

The Competitor (The Scientist): This part is basically built on an interview (on 12 September 2017) with an academic (in odontology), who is also active as a dentist specializing in digital ontology. He became the Swedish Champion in ‘Grand Prix in Science’ in 2014 by making a popular presentation of scientific results in 4 min.

At the start of the interview, the competitor states that he definitively has a strong winner instinct, and when he competes he is strongly prepared mentally and focused on winning. Since he has a background as a boxer, he states: ‘In individual sports, you have yourself to...

**Table 1.** Initially presumed similarities and differences in the logics of science and sport, in the perspective of openness and normative closure in science and sport, and their interrelations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competitive sport</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory</td>
<td>The ‘better argument’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>Enlightening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>Peer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality/fairness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules of conduct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test/statistics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normativity</td>
<td>Objectivity/interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaudits</td>
<td>Verifying/falsifying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre de Coubertin</td>
<td>e.g. Karl Popper, Hans-Georg Gadamer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
blame if you fail, and when you succeed – Wow! – you could take all the credit’. He con-
continues, thoughtfully, in this initial reflection:

‘Grand Prix in Science is an individual competition. It feels like being in a boxing ring. The
difference is not huge! You are on a stage, you have to perform … and there are referees, as
well as an audience. It is, surely, tense and nervous! And I prepare myself to win’. (We have,
despite the sport connotations to remember that we are still in a science context, albeit in the
domain of popular representations, my remark).6

During the preparation for the competition he starts by analysing the rules of the compe-
tition, which are essentially related to pedagogical awareness. He states: ‘If you are pedagog-
ical, it might work as a knockout’. His departure was: ‘Common people have to understand
what scientists are doing, and today we are used to pictures and movies’. Being a tactic,
the dentist thus, as a competitor, transformed his pedagogy into animations, which means
that all words are visualized during his performance depending on his competition mode.

When he came first in the quarterfinals, he got in touch with a coach in order to dis-
cuss how much effort should be put on, for instance, the introduction. In addition, he was
encouraged to adopt a more dramatic style as well as to focus more on his moves. This is,
of course, more strongly related to artistic logics than to athletics, even though we also find
artistic elements in sport. Still, according to our competitor, ‘he ought to have trained more
drama’, despite the final outcome. However, as he declares, he found it ‘hard to regard this
training as natural’.7

The training, as well as the preparation for the finals, was fairly extensive and goal-ori-
ented. He filmed himself and analysed the films with regard to posture and body language.
He thus found that he made too sweeping movements. However, ‘it was enough to put
on a slimmer shirt, which forced me to be more solid and restricted’. Of course, he also
measured the time for the presentation (which should be limited to 4 min). ‘So I went in
for it seriously!’

Before the finals, he had watched on YouTube all the contestants he was to compete
against in the finals. Thus, he found three favourites whose strengths he reflected on and
then tried to somehow adapt his ‘animation method’ in order to deal with their qualities
and what demands these made on his strategies in the competition. Before the finals, all
competitors train and prepare together. ‘But I did not give my everything’. The atmosphere
among the competitors was, according to our winner, humble and ‘academically pleasant,
not as in sport, despite the sport logic’ (paradoxically; my remark). Thus, in that perspective,
the competition was not experienced as a ‘real’ competition. The feeling after the finals was
‘relief’, as in all sport competitions. He states:

You have made all your efforts, slept badly. It has been sweaty; but perhaps not identically as
in physical sports. Still, the heart and the adrenaline have worked in a similar way. All senses,
except for the physical part, work in correspondence with all sports, at least individual sports.

He concluded the interview and the reflection with: ‘I had the desire to win, and though
I was not only in the game to have fun, it still was fun!’ He is now looking forward to
the progress of something like the European Champions League among universities: the
‘European Grand Prix in Science’.

The Coach: Behind a champion we find, as a rule, a coach. This part is hence based on an
interview (on 15 May 2017) with a ‘coach’ who trains two different universities’ competitors
in ‘Science Slam’ as well as in ‘Grand Prix in Science’. Her qualifications for the coach job are
related to rhetoric and to being the coordinator of a PhD course in communicating research.
She does not produce the speech (the play). Still, she initially presents some crucial guidelines in the first preparation of the act, such as ‘1 minute means 140 words’ and advises not to reduce the demands for scientific quality, despite the transfer to a ‘public narrative and representation’. Besides, the competitor should ‘not wait two minutes before presenting the essential objects and the result’. Thus, the focus on research results works similarly to records in sport. Yet, in general, she receives too broad and all-encompassing drafts, ‘which evidently will fail in practice’ (in the competition; my remark). Consequently, together with the scientist/competitor, she has to trim the draft in relation to the aim, the structure and the disposition and to the possibility of becoming a winner. Her experience is that scientists from natural sciences have an advantage, due to social scientists’ tendency to contextualize and present firm backgrounds. However, this tradition has its shortcomings in the context of ‘Grand Prix in Science’. Speed is crucial.

Unquestionably, this coach has received a lot of experience of what strategies and contents will have a chance to succeed. She has become increasingly meticulous about details at the start of the training. Her advice is using ‘word-for-word drafts in an initial step’. When it comes to the point, however, the competitor should avoid using the manuscript. Thus, you need a lot of time for training. Still, to learn the manuscript by reading from the book is not advisable, due its lack of aura and spirit. […] But, on the other hand, it is not possible to improvize during these few minutes. […] 15 seconds, and you are lost. […] The start of a sentence is important, and there are rhetorical tricks. In addition to a pleasant narrative, there must be a scientific argument. Important concepts that are used in the discipline should be used as well as repeated. The variation of these concepts could also be small. Media, like animations, work positively.

Other winning tactics include, according to the coach, ‘taking some dance steps, when talking about dance theory, or the philosopher’s (artistic) contemplation’. In such a way, competitors demonstrate a certain ‘ethos’ by presenting themselves ‘as competent, trustful and with credible benevolence like “I wish, seriously, that you will understand the core of the presentation”’. Thus, the coach argues: ‘Good tactics: What do you want the audience to remember?’

The coach has experienced a number of different styles in the presentation, due to whether it follows the practice and culture of natural or social science. However, certain differences are reduced during the training. Tables and diagrams are to be abandoned, and social scientists have to ‘avoid the desire of contextualizing, and instead recovering the hardcore’. The coach has also experienced ‘that the younger generation finds it easier to perform speedily without losing the content’. In light of social media, the young are in this respect more talented for this form of competition. However, as the coach points out, ‘talent does not progress without training’.

At the end of the day, the coach wonders: ‘What are they actually competing in?’ and argues reflectively:

It’s about taste and opinions. There are no fixed rules beyond the time limit. All of them are clever and capable. In comparison, for instance, everyone jumps 210, but if one of the athletes manages 212, she will be the winner. That's very clear. In 'Grand Prix', there are no such evident rules and limits. It's more about taste and opinions. Well, it's close to the logics of assessment sports, due to the artistic elements. […] Definitely, I can find the element of competition rather silly. Still, it was fun when we triumphed in 2014. My two universities have been presented on the prize podium during all the years they have participated in 'Grand Prix in Science' (6 years).
Not surprisingly, the experiences and arguments of the coach, as well as those of the scientist, have similarities with athletes’ position vis-à-vis their performances and motives, particularly in relation to individualistic sports with an artistic logic. In addition, there exist parallels, in sport and in ‘Grand Prix in Science’, both with regard to stress and to preparation. The training appears to be increasingly ritualized and focused on finding advantages depending on talents. The focus on results matches the striving towards records. Still, ‘Grand Prix’ could not be comfortably considered as a ‘sport culture’, regardless of a certain sportification process in the form of competition and in the attitudes among the participants. In these battles, for instance, we largely lack the ‘sweet tension of uncertainty’. Considering this, it is more like exhibition games, which are nevertheless regarded as sport, with winners and losers. Imaginably, concepts like ‘eventification’, as well as ‘gamification’, match the progress equally with the concept of sportification.

**Conclusions**

Sport might be the ultimate platform and the institutionalization of mankind’s attitude and existential need of the *citius, fortius, altius* approach and competitions. Sport’s impact could, in this respect, be grasped in its relation to science, as has been the ambition of this essay.

Thus, there seem to exist two parallel processes: the scientification of sport and the sportification of science. The first process seems to be fairly solid and substantial, whereas the other is rather ‘juvenile’ and unformed. Undoubtedly, science has become an important part in the development of sport, particularly in elite sport. Sports medicine and sports technology as well as sport psychology play significant roles in the striving and desire for peak performances and records. Yet, there are discussions that challenge the benefits of this rationalistic approach towards sport which, for instance, highlight the value of ‘natural training’ as well as back-to-nature and play elements (Angel 2016; Svensson 2014, 2016). As regards the relation between science and sport, an opposite trend has also been observed, in which sport logic influences the (popular) presentation of science. In this respect, this essay has talked about the sportification of science, by making reference to ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’.

By relatively condensed theoretical reasoning as well as minute empirical tests, this essay has tried to reflect on similarities in these forms of competition and in sports by choosing examples from individualistic sports. In the initial analysis, the aim has not been to regard these forms of competition in science as sports, in spite of the sportification processes. Still, the attitudes, the preparations, as well as the performances, contain resemblances to sport logics. For instance, the focus on ‘results’ in science, particularly in competition forms like ‘Grand Prix’, works like ‘records’ in sport. The attitude, as well as the stress among the competitors, seems to be equally ‘demanding’ in sport and in ‘Grand Prix’.

However, this sportification – or the attitudes and forms of sport – seems more likely to be captured by the concept of ‘eventification’ than by that of modern sport. Still, to current postmodern and post-Guttmannian concepts of sport ‘eventification’ might be added. In that respect, the popularization – or the availability – of science runs the risk of becoming ‘eventified’ by the use of the forms of sport and by the sportification processes. Thus, ‘Grand Prix in Science’ is more an event than a sport, even though still produced using the forms of sport and containing the similarities of sport and sportification processes.
Nevertheless, the presented subject is vital for the progress of sport science as a social scientific discipline and for the discipline’s analysis of ‘sport and society’. Thus, organized competitions and events in science are challenging from various perspectives. In a specific perspective, this development is a ‘victory’ for sport and for sport sciences. The logic of sport intrudes into other social spheres. It ought to make sport science – and the analysis of peak performances, tensions, entertainment and consumption – into an imperative part in the domain of social science (Carlsson and Hedenborg 2014). Consequently, the vital parts of modern sport science must be armed with theoretical strategies and instruments in order to handle this social development, in which ‘sport mentality’ plays such a significant part.

According to this diagnosis, everything in society, despite its differentiation, appears to be mixed up and confused. Yet, this mixture of systems might contribute to transparency, uncovering and increasing the understanding of an interest in various social issues. In this existential call, sport sciences might hold a privileged position regardless of several meta-theoretical shortcomings (Carlsson and Hedenborg 2014). In this respect, the study belongs to the discipline of sport sciences. In another perspective, it relates to the field of science studies and to the anthropology of science (Latour 1999).

With assurance, a study of the postmodern character of science, in light of the concepts and perspectives of sport science – with an explicit focus on the ‘sportification process’ – would be beneficial for its status and relevance. In that respect, the concept of sportification – in particular, the sportification process – will contribute to social science in general and to the analysis of social change as well as of the social conditions of humans. Thus, taking the concept of sportification seriously, also as a way to understand society and popular culture, will be a fruitful approach to ‘handing over the baton’. Thus, this text has handled science in the wake of the sportification process and, without doubt, interesting challenges are aroused by this meeting and mutual influence.8

Notes

1. As a supplement to these forms of measurement, there is an ‘awardification’ in (sport) science, as in society and sport in general. In my context, the following EASM Awards are offered: The New Research Award, the Chelladurai Award, the ESMQ Award, the Reviewers Award, and the Short Paper Award.

2. Of course, there are exceptions. Connor (2011), for instance, discusses how our perceptions of time and space are affected by sports. His focus is primarily on time and space and on how sport, in various manners, moves, handles, manipulates – and ‘plays with’ – time and space. By various spatial analyses, with sport as a ‘social laboratory’, Connor produces an understanding of social time; i.e. real time vs. playtime, as well as slowdowns and the delay of the game (Connor 2011, 72, 73).

3. In some discourses, however, science’s relation to reason and enlightenment has been targeted and questioned, particularly in the wake of the criticism of positivism (cf. Horkheimer 2004; Horkheimer and Adorno 1997).

4. However: ‘This is not Sport’ is a frequent statement, maintained by ideologically impregnated sports evangelists, often in a rather stubborn manner, in regard to novel and marginal ‘sports’. Yet, regularly, these personal conceptualizations and definitions of sport are not particularly firm, solid and stable. There often exists illogical reasoning in these attempts to include various activities in the definition of sport. In this perspective, it appears more uncomplicated to claim what kinds of activities or forms should not be considered as sport. Still, this strategy will not define the question: ‘What is sport?’ For sure, the question – or the dilemma – of finding a reasonable definition of sport will probably turn up during the reading of this essay.
This is, evidently, a tricky question, shaped by emotions, habits and traditions, in addition to academic disciplines, careers and positions. In this context, by a permissive attitude towards definitions, I will argue for a ‘polycentric’ concept(ualization) of sport, as a method to test our traditional concept(ion) of sport.

5. There are minor differences between ‘Science Slam’ and ‘Grand Prix in Science’. ‘Science Slam’ is a competition form of a more local character, which is located to Gotland (in the summer) during the ‘Almedal Week’, in Visby, Sweden’s largest political meeting place, with all the political parties present, as well as various forms of entertainments and marketing. This competition between the universities of Malmö and Lund has, initially, been divided into different categories (e.g. ten, seven or three minutes) but has progressed towards three-minute battles. Even ‘Grand Prix in Science’, which starts with qualification rounds at most universities in Sweden, was primarily divided into different time frames. In the qualification, the scientists competed in three minutes, and in the finals (in Stockholm) the time expanded to four minutes. Currently, ‘Grand Prix’ has established four minutes as standard.

6. This impression is duplicated by a Swedish professional in MMA who competed in ‘Masterchef’ with a similar attitude and experience (cf. Carlsson and Svensson 2015).

7. In sport, there is an ongoing discussion related to ‘natural training’ vs. ‘rational training’ with various kinds of technical equipment (Svensson 2014, 2016).

8. If science becomes increasingly influenced by the logics of modern sport, equality and fairness among the universities will be natural, due to sport’s functional and normative foundation in fair play; and in the prolongation draft systems and salary caps will, perhaps, become an alternative.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


