

## NORBERT ELIAS AND CONTEMPORARY SPORT: COMMENT ABOUT THE CIVILISING PROCESS AND CONTROLLING EMOTIONS IN EXTREME SPORTS<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to illustrate the relevance and originality of interpreting the current sporting activities, like adventure sports, from the evaluation of Norbert Elias about the civilizing process. To build this thought, we discuss the search for rationality in the behavior of individuals, thinking about them in a rational logic, inter-related to the broad social webs. Sport in the civilising process - including the rules of conduct and feelings are also considered as libidinal impulse, affective and emotional control, was led to an evolution of social rules in all fields. The role of emotion, discipline, emotional control in the field of sport as an area where expressing feelings (which are restricted for the rest of social life) is allowed. The sport is seen as a channel for disseminating mimesis, emotion and catharsis. We consider Extreme Sport as an action that seek emotion and the uncontrolled control; the sport comes from the development of rationality, decision-making, actions of individuals and the complexity of symbolic webs.

**Key-words:** Sport; Civilising Process; Extreme Sports.

### **Norbert Elias e o esporte contemporâneo: comentários sobre o processo civilizador e controle das emoções em esportes radicais**

#### **Resumo**

Neste estudo, objetivou-se ilustrar a relevância e originalidade de interpretar as atividades desportivas atuais, por exemplo, esportes radicais, a partir da avaliação de Norbert Elias sobre o processo civilizatório. Para construir esta reflexão, discutimos a busca de racionalidade no comportamento dos indivíduos, pensando-os dentro de uma lógica racional mais abrangente, inter-relacionados às teias sociais. Esporte no processo civilizatório, incluindo que as regras de conduta e sentimentos também são considerados como libidinais, controle dos impulsos afetivos, emocionais levou a uma evolução das regras sociais em todos os campos. O papel da emoção, disciplina, controle emocional no campo do esporte, enquanto uma área onde as expressões evidentes de sentimentos (que são restritos para o resto da vida social) são permitidos. O esporte é visto como canal para difundir mimesis, emoção e

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catarse. Consideramos o Esporte Radical como ação que busca a emoção e o descontrole controlado; o esporte vem do desenvolvimento da racionalidade, da tomada de decisões, das ações dos sujeitos e parte da complexidade das teias simbólicas.

**Palavras-chave:** Esporte; Processo Civilizador; Esportes Extremos.

### **Norbert Elias y el deporte contemporáneo: comentarios acerca del proceso civilizador y el control de las emociones en deportes extremos**

#### **Resumen**

Esa investigación tuvo como objetivo ilustrar la relevancia y originalidad de interpretar las actividades deportivas actuales, por ejemplo, deportes extremos, de la evaluación de Norbert Elias sobre el proceso civilizador. Para construir esta reflexión, se discute la búsqueda de la racionalidad en el comportamiento de los individuos, por considerar que dentro de una lógica más amplia, interrelacionada redes social racional. El deporte en el proceso civilizador, incluidas las normas de conducta y los sentimientos también son considerados como control libidinal, emocionales, impulsos emocionales llevaron a una evolución de las normas sociales en todos los ámbitos. El papel de la emoción, la disciplina, el control emocional en el ámbito del deporte como un área donde se permiten las claras expresiones de sentimientos (que están restringidos por el resto de la vida social). El deporte es visto como un canal para la difusión de la mimesis, la emoción y la catarsis. Consideramos que la acción deporte extremo como la búsqueda de la emoción controlada y no controlada; el deporte viene del desarrollo de la racionalidad en la toma de decisiones, las acciones de los individuos y de la complejidad de las redes simbólicas.

**Palabras clave:** Deporte; Proceso Civilizador; Deportes extremos.

#### **Rationality in social behaviour of subjects**

The sum of knowledge and descriptions of experiences, or events, streamlined in the research body in the humanities (especially its key players) allow to overcome the simple common sense concerning any topic of scientific basis. Considering how import is cumulative production does not mean defending its freezing, as if it was a revelation impossible to overcome, but the quest for transformation.

Observing reality strengthens the idea of rationality respecting the agent of social action, a perspective that communicates with categories of rational actions presented by Weber (1994). The actions usually can be understood from a rational individual component, which drops at first a generalised manifestation of a random behaviour, regardless of environment and of collective patterns. In the civilizing process, Elias (1992) seeks to build the genesis of behaviour and the actions based on rational elements, but always attentive to the psychological manifestations. He will observe that the traditional idea of reason, or rationality, with which all people are endowed naturally, is an innate trait of the human species (Elias, 1978).

Normally, we imagine the human being nowadays as having different mental compartments. We draw distinctions between mind and soul, reason and feeling,

consciousness and instinct or ego and id. The clear differentiation of the psychic functions evoked by this word, however, is not something simply delivered by nature. It can only occur in humans when they grow up in a group, in a society of individuals (Elias, 1989: 36).

Elias takes the focus from the rationality of individual agents, subjects of social action, and start thinking on a comprehensive rationality, or on a wide system, or in the social formation that bears some form, or pattern of relationship with the behaviour of individuals, but distinct in specificity. Every complex society is indeed a rational, comprehensive component, with interrelated social webs, in which the action of individuals fits into the full set of actions of other subjects. Simultaneously, action decision starts from a complex assessment of subjects, considering the feasibility of this action and its normative component.

Concerning our social system, there is space for individual decisions, including opportunities that can be used or lost, especially challenges for people. The position of individuals making decisions in society can lead both their personal fate and family, groups and even nations. In this model, searching for rationality in behaviour, the individual is an action agent and the initial milestone. The consequences of actions, however, do not end in itself, revealing how complex rationality, normative components, possibility assessment are elements which affect the social context definition.

The opportunities people are forced to choose are not created and controlled exclusively by themselves. Such opportunities are prescribed and limited by inserting specific structures in a society and by the type of roles people play within such society. Further, whatever the type of opportunity it enjoys, 'its act will mix with that of other people, triggering new action sequences, of which direction and interim results will not depend on individuals, but on the distribution of power structures and tensions throughout this mobile human network' (Elias, 1982: 48).

### **Sport in the civilising process**

For Elias, the social norm of conduct and sentiment, especially in the upper classes, began to develop quite clearly in the early sixteenth century. Controlling conduct and emotion became stricter and more differentiated, concerned with the control and eliminating excesses and corporal punishment. Thus, in the advanced twenty-first-century communities, relations and collective activities can only be accomplished satisfactorily when the people involved evenly, stably control their libidinal, emotional impulses, more spontaneous; including their changes of heart. It means that, "the survival and social success in these societies depend, to some extent, on a breastplate (neither too strong nor too weak) for self-control. In such societies, there is a comparatively small space for strong feelings, deep antipathies

or rejection of people, and scarcely any for anger, deadly hatred or unstoppable momentum to beat someone” (Elias, 1992: 55-56). Persons presenting serious disturbance are considered victims of feelings they cannot control, then they may suffer social restrictions, e.g. admission to prisons or mental hospitals. In general, societies that adopt high standards of civilisation, thanks to a strict control of physical violence by the state, the resulting, personal tensions lead to a feeling of stress.

We consider important to stress that this idea of tension, for Elias, is not the same for Freud. For Elias, self-control is made of human nature, and therefore does not necessarily lead to manifestations of neurosis or pathologies. From a model based on the concepts of Eros and Thanatos, Freud (2012) will also define civilisation (or culture) as a set of forms of repression. However, their perception of individuals towards the quest of survival, understood as the confrontation of the reality principle with the pleasure principle, has quite deep, tragic consequences and effects, aiming well-being. For Elias, there is something innate in humans to control the emotions, allowing them to live in society. The author does not deny the violent nature of humans, but states that the availability to control impulses is an inherent, own aspect (Elias, 1989: 78).

As for rationality, Elias is right when stating that human society is set up in interpersonal relationships, subject to a chain of actions that never begins or ends in individuals, but is part of a broad assessment in seeking for rational goals. These actions both include events related to daily life, e.g. sitting in the dining room or the concept of childhood, and is also linked with the idea of a separation of time. For Elias (1992), the uses of time are ways of orientation, at both social level and physical universe. It works using symbolic exchanges in the forms to control human behaviour, complementing and confirming the civilising process. The time control, necessary to live in a farming community, is not comparable with the control in an industrial society. In the first case, the community needs natural indicators, e.g. day, night, rain, seasons. In second, community members require a mechanical device that marks time to guide and regulate their conduct.

Building this referential model of completion for civilising process, Elias systematise new forms of interaction to prove his theory on social comprehensive webs and on conduct control. The author discusses social relationships, habits, customs, ways of seeing, of being seen, of dressing, of using time, especially civilising process in sports. There was a general growth in sporting codes in the same direction as the civilising process. If we compare the games popular in the late Middle Ages, with the games of the Modern Age, we see a rise in sensitivity and a drop in violence. The increased sensitivity is seen in concern for others, in which the activities become less brutal. The drop in the use of violence can be seen from the systematisation of rules, which preserves individuals with concern for plasticity in the sport. We can illustrate by using the boxing. The boxing was born of popular practices of duels. The old martial arts were a way to resolve conflicts, in which two individuals or whole groups gathered at fixed locations to

deal with their differences. Armed groups burned into disarmed groups, afterwards into individual fights, and then into exclusive use of senior members. Therefore, gradually, street fighting was limited in England to a particular place, until exist an intermediary (the arbiter). Subsequently, boxing undergone the most stringent rules, ranking practitioners into categories, groups, weights, which allowed more equal opportunities (Elias, 1978).

Regional participation becoming inter-regional competitions is another point that required regulation of sport. Similar rules were necessary for different groups confront one another in tournaments. For that, clubs representing each region were created, facilitating the mediation between members from sundry locations. The game was institutionalised, bureaucratised, rationalised, with the ultimate aim to delivery participants the same chance. We can interpret the agreement of rules as potential superior levels of integration, dropping in violence and allowing more communicative forms of social relationship. We bear out that building rules leads to the creation of a monitoring, representation body (Elias, 1989: 92).

The spread of sports came with sundry rational, necessary decisions, e.g. social and political development, in which the upper classes started to act politically, including their moments of fun. The civilising process cannot be apart and naturally differs in parts of society. Firstly, political development was not active (in England with the Glorious Revolution); afterwards, sports became rational and popular games developed. Such development process is integrated and dynamic, and one cannot anticipate or prioritise how actions engage. Simply, the same types of people who took part in the pacification and in the rise in regulating political, economic, social ideas, so did for popular games.

In this wise, Elias and Dunning concern to presenting a growth of sports by rationalising the process, without splitting them from the process of social development in its wide sense. Physical activities, performances, arts make up moral education of individuals within society. In general, sports expression and interaction can change how to act, allowing spontaneity, which are is tolerated in daily situations (work, family parties, religious events, school). It means there is a clearly evolution process; sports, however, are strikingly different from other social contexts. For the civilising process, in sports the different component is a full consent for strong and passionate effusion. Obviously it does not mean a return to barbarism, although compared to the rules in other social contexts (work, church, school, family relations, rules, rules to control social action subjects) tend to be calmer. However, such rules softened in specific contexts of sport are part of the civilising process.

Such ethics creation within sports is socially allowed by acts considered violent or amoral, e.g.: insults during football matches; wearing appalling clothes; alcoholic beverages; symbolic war between supporters; watching violent shows; sexual liberalisation, etc. Such tolerance, according to Elias and

Dunning (1986: 280), is a way of expressing moral desires repressed during social evolution and including collective, civilising rules. Sporting activities are part of this process, whilst strong and passionate effusion.

The symbolic war among supporters is a typical example, used by Elias and Dunning (1986) to illustrate the social repression and demonstrate that simultaneously there is a need to loosen up the rules at some point. The repetitive component of this phenomenon, therefore, is logical and meets some need within the process, concluding that people who took part in vandalism acts have moments of violence in social life (family, school, work, religion). The violence is somewhat part of the life; in the game of football, however, such violence is excessive, since at that place strong, passionate effusion is allowed.

The major field of study of authors was assessing football games and England supporters. In interviews with some members, according to Elias and Dunning (1986: 293), it is clear that the sports event is sidelined, highlighting that fighting against police and rival supporters are the biggest event. In the speeches from supporters, Dunning realised social neurosis, i.e. daily duty world repression from such fanatics, who during fighting externalise all their repressed drives and the entire burden from civilising process. Elias and Dunning named such action *The Quest for Excitement* (1986: 275).

Interpreting strong, passionate infusion in football stadiums is hugely important when assessing the Brazilian sports events. To get close to it is clearly difficult, nevertheless, Elias and Dunning explain the game using a nuance of war zone, in which opposing teams simulate attack and defence scenarios, similar to army battles. Added to the sense of clash, is the formation of groups and recognition for other groups, from a common team. The factions are part of this war game, simulated by the football game (mimesis).

The quest for excitement is how they run away from social repression. It happens during spare time. In this case, Elias and Dunning see such time as a broad process to create social, interdependent ties, unlike, for example, the world of social obligations, e.g. school, work, family, religion, in which the repression is.

In spare time, unlike the work environment, the types of relationship are not systematised and defined beforehand. There is an articulation of the social ties during spare time, which includes liking, disliking, loving, hating. Feelings are allowed, which are prohibited in the world of obligations, so its importance in the civilising process. Rules to be preserved in sports do exist; however, we compare them to the social rules. The result from it exposes sports with less restriction on certain actions, e.g. controlled decontrol, which means a decontrol subjects can deal with. Despite the decontrol, subjects should rationally assess the extent and possibility of such action within their social universe.

Sports activities in general allow social rules to be soften. Such fact, however, differs in a tennis match, in a race of 100 m, in a football match. There is an excitement level for each sport, as well as for

basic rules of coexistence. But all sports whet in individuals the quest for excitement. Appreciating a leisure activity over another is up to the group and the subjects.

### **Emotion role**

There is a monotony of feelings and an optimisation of action with the invasion of work activities in all spheres of life, making it in order. The emotional stimulation provided by sports activities, e.g. mimetic type, culminates in pleasant tension and excitement. The mimetic activities are part of the civilising process; the mimesis explains how to allow decontrolled actions to free time activities.

The term 'mimetic' refers to events grouped by the structural feature: raising emotions closely related to that individuals experience in the normal course of their lives.

In the mimetic event people may experience fear, laughter, anguish, love, empathy, pleasure, friendship, hatred. In the mimetic context, all feelings are connected with the feeling of joy. The experiences and human behaviours in the mimetic context represent thus a specific change in the typical experiences, behaviour of what we call real life (Elias, 1978: 155).

The playful and pleasurable emotions individuals seek in their spare time simultaneously represent the complement and the opposite of world of social obligations. Complement means part of the society in general and opposite means the world of recreational activities, which is logic *per se*, likely to overcome the routine rational from emotional excitement.

In societies such as São Paulo (Brazil), which require discipline and a great emotional modesty, the field allowed for overt expressions of strong, good feelings is already strictly set. Sporting activities facilitate how to realise pleasant good, strong emotions, which would be needed in daily live. The basis of its cathartic effect lies in the restoration of normal mental voice, by means of such emotions possible in their spare time. The term 'catharsis' was defined by Elias (1992:101) as a curative element in cleaning the body, the 'catharsis' is calming down by emotion. It is the epitome of the tension during the excitement, it is your final answer after a physical activity after a play or an orchestra performance or any other spare time activity. The feeling of pleasure and relief is promoted by catharsis.

It is clear that Elias does not indicate the emotion, or its quest, or even mimesis and catharsis, as stuck with the feeling of pleasure tied up with sex. We pointed out in the first part of this study that individuals have meaning only if they are tied up with their comprehensive social webs. Elias is not concerned with the individual emotion tied to sexual stimulation and to pleasure. It is indeed a wider necessary social stimulus (much less specialised), which may or may not have libidinal source. "The

emotional stimulation of humans becomes different in sundry senses, and sex is one of these expressions of emotion” (Elias, 1989: 143).

Activities are interdependent in any society; for this very reason, they obey rules and sanctions to avoid uncontrollable feelings. Sexual satisfaction and emotional satisfaction are within a broader socialising programme, including beliefs and restraints, or even the explicit prohibitions against the dangers from releasing emotion. In advanced industrial societies, so that recreational activities can be created in a redoubt with social approval, a moderate level of emotion is necessary. “We can only understand the specific character and the precise functions of leisure in society if we realise the level of emotion control in public, private life has risen even more” (Elias, 1989: 85). We understand then the society advances in controlling emotions, even with excitement. Emotion is part of the civilising process and develops with it. Hence, emotion, catharsis, mimesis are not purely libidinal components but structures related to the libido and social development.

The pleasure in sports for Elias is a nice tension, a pleasurable excitement, which culminates in pleasure and thaw.

We could consider the nice tension and excitement from a battle culminating in victory as a consequence of natural forces involved in this act. Probably it is so. It might not be enough, though. All in all, I consider nice the need from a tournament tension with satisfaction in their own right of a basic need likely, socially induced, especially if the tournament requires physical exertion as in sports (Elias, 1992: 77).

The sporting events occur within the decontrol limit and are closely linked to other social dimensions, e.g. culture, groups of friends, material possibilities. At the football stadium strong and passionate outbursts are allowed, which would be suppressed by social control in other areas. In this case, Elias and Dunning said that the effusion of drive cannot affect the civilising process in complex societies, since the very moment when pouring out such repression is within such process (Elias, 1992: 189).

Overall, the authors start from the idea the quest for excitement is a social need, part of the formation of complex societies. In this wise, sports smooth incorporating rules, since if there was no relief of repression, an implosion could occur, or a collective neurosis, which would cause a social instability even broader.

Sports must adapt to the sensitivity of people with physical violence, which is feature of social behaviour in the last stages of civilising process, to straighten tensions out. If we compare the contemporary sports with those from earlier times, we easily realise that only those adapted to the unwillingness of individuals during civilising process have survived. Population presented unwillingness



towards activities such as cockfighting, violent fights without equipment and suchlike, and they were extinct by a repressive state apparatus. 'Cockfighting, wild animal sacrifice during a time were hobbies; today, they cause grudge to members of industrial society' (Elias, 1978: 57). Some of them still present, despite the unwillingness, e.g. bullfighting, a game using certain types of fireworks on the floor at Petrolina (state of Pernambuco, Brazil), gang fights at *Baile Funk* (funk parties in Brazil), fights among supporters.

We can illustrate the civilising process in sports through full-contact unarmed combat events called *vale-tudo* (everything allowed) in Brazil. In such events arbiters and rules are off and the fight ends when one of the opponents give up. Such events developed with time passing and marketing. Among sundry reasons, the role of the state is important in banning such 'sport' when viewers could not bear such violence, and members of civil society disagree with such 'sport'. Today, UFC is more civilised and has arbiters. Biting, hitting intimate parts, fingering in the eye are prohibited, and the practitioners are under protection.

### **Catharsis and extreme sports**

Elias and Dunning (1986) presented a short list of activities belonging to the mimetic category, namely, theatre, concert, car race, cinema, hunting, fishing, games, climbing, gambling, dancing, watching television. In physical activity there is also mimesis. Moreover, in the football stadium catharsis is expressed at its peak, allowing people who never have insult whoever to be set free from social restraints. Euphoric masses mean social mask for subjects hiding behind a symbol, i.e. football, supporters. In this case, the group collectively behave as supporters, forgetting all the other social positions, such as father, son, husband, worker, businessman, worker. Supporters within stadium recognise one another, which is established by the own stadium and their teams.

Questing for excitement, however, is not static, the activities are constantly changing. On one hand, there is the willingness to seek different emotions, usually because they no longer offer catharsis. On the other hand, the principle of activity, the tension level or the very game structure, e.g. football, perhaps do not warn some people from a specific generation.

The extreme sports come from such quest for different emotions, compared to those in the sports world. However, we highlight that extreme sports have not a cathartic emotional component larger than a football match. Elias does not mind in differentiating emotions.

In this case, questing for emotion, feeling pleasure and subsequent catharsis is inherent in any recreational activity, e.g. going to the cinema, theatre, football match, going rafting, climbing, canoeing. All activities play a role in controlled decontrol and the need the group created with the cultural dynamics of complex societies tell them apart.

The extreme sports (canoeing, hiking, rafting, mountain biking, climbing, bungee jumping) are very recent within civilising process. There are sundry types of sports; in fact, new types are created all the time.

These sports have some fundamental features: the first is the use of technology in all materials by developing physical techniques to boost, relax, and smooth the activity; the second, the security. Contrary to fantastic advertisement or to films, extreme sports are rationally designed and risks tend to be nought. They are all calculated and the environment, although the nature, is all mapped to ease access and practice. Finally, extreme sports have space in natural elements par excellence, quest for contact with nature, widespread false idea of decontrol people would face in natural environment.

From environmental discourses on quest for natural elements lost through industrialisation, extreme sports express such vision that joins man and nature. In such activities, the quest for emotion replaced the exotic, well-designed forms of nature. The natural environment in fact is a minor component, is only a place of fantasy, since practitioners firstly seek emotion, excitement, mimesis and posterior catharsis. The controlled decontrol argued by Elias in recreational activities stresses risks being lessened, thus a sportsperson can realise the thrill of death off of its end.

The awakening of pleasant emotions in recreational activities includes types of pleasurable tensions with enjoyable forms of emotion (specific in daily life), although such form perhaps are tied up with other types of emotion. The risk (walking on the edge of an abyss) is part of many recreational activities (Elias, 1989: 127).

This snippet of Elias shows how the quest for risks in decontrol sites fills up pleasurable tensions within sports activities.

The extreme sports raise strong feelings, creating tension, excitement, made-up danger, fear, pleasure, sorrow and mimetic joy. As in real life, we may feel stray from hope, triumph, fear of defeat or death. The strong feelings from an imaginary space and its open expression in the company of others may seem at present more joyful than other free time activities. It occurs because contemporary society, increasingly individualised and bureaucratic, slightly expresses themselves in group. We can observe that sportspeople of such extreme sports follow the process of social individualism, expressing an intensified selfishness. Considering the theoretical perspective we illustrate herein, we can say that this type of quest for excitement in recreational activities strengthen the characteristics of social evolution.

In this wise, it is reasonable to defend the idea extreme sports mirrors current society more than football. Two factors are critical to this assessment: the first is individuality. Collectivism, playing together, other people needs are essential to team sports, whilst for extreme sports equipment are

individualised in the development of activity itself. The second factor relates to the world of cultural industry, especially film and television. The world of images increasingly penetrates society. Made-up death, fantastic actions, supermen, fear, insecurity are resources widely used by Hollywood and their producers. Extreme sports are an approach to the life–death feeling happening on screen, in which the activities are summarised in the quest for emotions that have been widely explored in the films. Football, in turn, still lives warfields of the middle ages, as discussed Elias (1982), hence may be less representative in questing for sensation and excitement, typical of current society.

The extreme sports are widespread and practised, they lead to a degree of excitement that promotes catharsis, releasing social tensions, which probably was not achieved by traditional activities in spare time, or even because physical contact and violence of team activities would no longer be supported by some individuals in our society; hence, the need for constant innovation. Extreme sports were built to arouse emotions, evoke tensions in a controlled manner over a period of time, without the risks with the excitement of life in other situations. It means a mimetic emotion that can be nice and produce a liberating and cathartic effect with the emotional resonance of the design imagery of death, fear and superman, images widely circulated by means of mass communication. Finally, extreme sports are accepted because a release of instinctual energy that does not put in danger life and social order occurs. They constitute a moment of relief from daily stress and access to the feeling of catharsis.

### Final considerations

The aim of this study was to present the contemporary aspect of Elias, showing that the civilising process (e.g. macro-sociological theory) can illustrate how our society develops in sports. Further, such sport involves bringing forth accumulated knowledge and reflections in the social sciences.

Such subject is impossible to be exhausted and so does pointing out all the implications of a sophisticated referential, as the one presented by Elias (within a chapter). Shortly, we believe, however, we could illustrate how the social expression may be perceived as the result of the development of rationality in all fields, and that the decisions of subjects in social action as result from complexity of symbolic webs result in developing the civilising process. Football, supporter fights, *vale-tudo* and extreme sports are examples of how society developed, progressed and regressed from a complex civilisation. Extreme sports, in particular, are part of a broad process that can be understood from the model of understanding emotion control. In regulated societies as ours, the absence of self-control leads to eliminating activity, e.g. cockfighting, *vale-tudo* restrictions. The balance of recreational activities depends on developing restrictive power of the state, civil society and participants. The balance of tensions between desires and emotional stimulation of the participants in recreational activities should be supervised by state, civil agencies to avoid smothering control and damage.

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According to Elias, a rise in efficiency in the means of control to prevent spurring on mood, leading to refining and extolling emotional responses from recreational activities (as in sports), can be seen as a fundamental feature for contemporary sports.

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