

HISTORICAL REFLECTION

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Chess in the Light of a Comprehensive Definition of Sport

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Summary: This paper shows that chess may be called a *sport* since it fits the definition of the word, both in descriptive and analytical terms [Krawczyk 2000]. On the assumption that theoretical knowledge involves the entirety of statements on a subject, and a scientific theory attempts to explain the matter – in this case, *sport* – from a given point of view [Grabowski 1999], the author begins from presenting a number of various depictions of *sport*. Then, basing on a comprehensive definition of the word, he tries to prove that chess belongs to the domain of activities defined as *sport*.

Introduction

Sport is characterized by: struggle, competition, striving for success, egalitarianism, creativity, and full self-realization of individuals and groups [Krawczyk 1978]. Due to commonness of the word *sport*, it is difficult to manage its strict definition. The term is being explained in many ways. The explanations often superimpose in some aspects. But there is little doubt that a uniform definition of sport has not been created so far. Since a single, solid-based and unquestionable definition of sport is hard to find, several theoretical responses to the problem have been presented below.

Is it possible to consider “the Royal Game” a sport? P. Skowronski defines it as a specific form of pastime and a kind of art which evokes the feelings of delight and aesthetic satisfaction [Skowronski 2004]. He claims that the Royal Game educates the players and makes them think logically by combining separate elements in a wholeness. K. Rogucki in *Szachy i filozofia [Chess and philosophy]* analyzes the character and the essence of chess, starting from the 17th century. He also looks for relationships between chess and science, education, art, and sport. Following the thought of E. Lasker, the World Chess Champion at the beginning of the 20th century, he says that chess is a fight between two minds and should be examined relatively to mental and emotional make-up of the players. K.

Rogucki quotes also Alexander Alekhine, another great World Chess Champion, who believed that chess eventually led to educational, artistic and scientific accomplishments. For B. Larsen, as Rogucki indicates, chess is a game, a sport, a form of science and a form of art; and S. Czerniakow in *Czym są szachy? [What is Chess?]* recognizes chess as a kind of science, art and pastime.

Considering all that – the ways of defining sport and the ways of perceiving chess – I attempt to answer the question: Can chess be called a sport?

Selected definitions of sport

The term *sport* derives from Latin *disporto* and it was brought into the written language in the 16th century by the British. Two centuries later it was used for the first time in Poland [Dziubinski 2003].

Nowadays, such activities as cycling, morning work-out, street running and many others are commonly associated with sport doing. Scientific depictions of sport are not much different from the common understanding of the word.

There are many different definitions of the term, although their core elements remain similar and stable. Here are some of such definitions:

Z. Dziubinski [2003] enlists characteristic features of sport as follows:

— competition

- maximizing of scores
- non-profit attitude
- activities different from those satisfying the basic living needs
- emotions.

He clearly states that such features are typical of record-seeking sports; however nowadays some of the above-mentioned elements have lost their meaning, e.g. the non-profit attitude.

Z. Krawczyk emphasizes the humanistic character of sport [Krawczyk 2000]. Sport is a playground for individuals and groups who want to spend time together; it is just a game, both in a moral sense and in its striving for optimal scores. It may be viewed as a sort of work, purely pragmatic.

The practice of sport is closely connected with perfecting the human body. K. Heinemann defines sport as a way of body movement, control, technique and expression [Heinemann 1989]. For him, sport activities are always physical. Sport alters the physical appearance and the body awareness of a person.

In *White Paper on Sport* issued by the European Commission, sport means "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels."

The Small Encyclopedia of Sport defines sport as human's "conscious, voluntary activity taken up in order to meet the needs of a game, performance or fight as well as the need of internal self-improvement by means of methodical development of physical, mental and volitional features." According to the *Encyclopedia*, "individual or group competition in sport, whose specific form is a system of rivalries, is non-antagonistic, and its conditions and rules aim at objective and exact comparison of competitors' values, abilities and skills, enabling their optimal appearance (...) Sport assumes various shapes and fulfills various functions. It is a specific form of playing or fighting, of an imaginary – physical or intellectual – game which makes the base of emotional engagement of its participants" [Gilewicz, Ulatowski 1987, pp. 439-440].

It should be noted that "sport" is not only understood here as an organized activity practised in clubs and other sports organizations, but also in terms of recreation and private life. Otherwise we could not say that it assumes various forms and functions. Sport is a specific form of activity aiming at improving man's physical and mental potentials, individually or in groups, according to the established rules.

A legal act concerning the issue in question is a bill of June 25, 2010 which became a law on October

16 of the same year. It replaced two hitherto valid acts: the law on physical culture [Journal of Laws 2007, No. 226, item 1675 with alterations] and the law on qualified sport [Journal of Laws 2005, No. 155, item 1298 with alter.].

According to the law, *sport* is "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels." It is worth mentioning that the act passes over the partition between qualified, amateur or professional sports.

The most comprehensive definition of sport, encompassing the widest range of possible explanations, was presented by M. Demel and A. Sklad in their published as early as 1970 but still influential work [Demel, Sklad 1970]. According to M. Demel, the constituent properties of sport could be named as follows:

- direct motives independent of basic living needs
- decisions and activities accompanied by positive emotions
- no material result, as in case of product-making labour
- motional activity connected with special forms of physical movement
- methodical striving for gaining optimal scores
- evident competition as one of the main stimuli to improvement
- strict compliance with rules and standards concerning the equipment, conditions and movement forms, which provides for quantifiability and comparability of scores

To sum up, the above depictions show that there is no single definition of *sport* which would precisely mark out its domain. It is true, that in some aspects those depictions superimpose; each of them, for example, enhances the moment of sport's *physicality*:

- The European Commission speaks of *physical activity*
- *The Small Encyclopedia of Sport* speaks of *methodical development of physical features*
- the law of June 25, 2010 mentions *forms of physical activity*
- M. Demel stresses the *motional character* of sport

Chess and the definition of sport

For the needs of further analysis I accept M. Demel's definition of sport as the most mature, interesting and comprehensive one. By referring to the respective features of sport considered constituent by Demel, I try to settle whether chess is apt for being a *sport discipline*.

In sport, direct motives are independent of basic living needs. To be true, there are chessplayers whose main source of income is playing chess – among them such celebrities as Garry Kasparov, Number One in the world's rating lists since the mid-1980s, when he won the chess crown after the famous duels with A. Karpov in Moscow [Pytel 1986] and in Sevilla [Bronstein 1988]. The group of chessplayers living on the Royal game include grandmasters, international champions and FIDE masters. But they make up only a tiny part of the host of players who are candidates for masters or hold levels from 1 to 5, or are unassociated amateurs. Chess is most often viewed as a noble duel, emotional competition, persistent fight of intellects accompanied by strong feelings and emotions, which provide us with mental exercises or social relaxation. So, the vast majority of chessplayers do not play the game to satisfy their basic living needs. Of course, there are professionals who gain profit through chess. And although it contradicts to some extent the independence of basic living needs, it also shows that chess do not differ from other recognized sport discipline, where the division between the professional and the amateur was established long ago. Generally, with the exception of top masters and eminent champions of the world, playing chess is not aimed at satisfying one's basic living needs.

The positive emotions accompanying the game are observed in chessplayers on all levels, because chess is a multi-faceted and diversified phenomenon, totally absorbing and satisfaction giving. The emotions are experienced not only during the game itself, but also afterwards, when the players are reviewing the game with the same pieces and at the same table for analysis. This post-match analysis of a game is very often its integral part and a kind of ritual. Sometimes it evokes higher emotions than the game itself which excludes the possibility of retracting a move. During the post-match analysis we are free to play many variants without being restricted by the rigours of time measured by a special clock, as during the tournament. There is no doubt that chess is played voluntarily and because of the positive emotions it involves.

The only "material product" of dealing with the 64 squares is subtle strategic plans, ideas of movements and unusual situations, and the obligatory record of the course of events during a contest, made by the judges according to the Chess Code. Except this single sheet of paper chess does not have any material effects and is more remote from "product-making labour" than other sport disciplines.

Motional activity connected with special forms of physical movement is one of the main features of

sport, according to M. Demel's definition. In case of chess it is not quite convincing. For many, it is the insufficiency of physical movement that places chess outside the domain of sport. Although books and manuals on chess are full of words connected with motion – *to make a move, to approach, to stop, to capture, to immobilize, en passant, to move across the board in this or that direction, to shift diagonally, vertically or horizontally etc.* – most of these verb forms do not refer to the player, but to the pieces on the chessboard. However, the phrase "to make a move" makes us ask: "Who makes a move?", and the answer is: the player – either directly, by stretching his/her arm, taking a piece and making a *move* (it terms of physics and in terms of chess), or indirectly, by communicating his/her intended move to the opponent who physically shifts a piece in the way he is told to. The latter is possible and does happen in "blind" games, when a grand master not only does not look at the chessboard but competes simultaneously with dozens of players sitting at different tables in a row. If we were to give other examples of sportsmen whose physical movements are not as intensive as in case of runners or volleyball/basketball players, we could mention a coxswain in rowing, who is in charge of the crew and gives all the commands; also motorboating and Formula One races belong to the same category – and nobody denies that Waldemar Marszalek or Robert Kubica are sportsmen. Bodily-motor activity of such sportsmen is not much more intensive than that of chessplayers, and in case of a coxswain it is even minor. Despite some doubts, then, even in this motional aspect chess seems to satisfy Demel's definition of sport.

The other requirements met by chess will be discussed cumulatively, as mutually related ones, namely:

- methodical striving for gaining optimal scores
- evident competition as one of the main stimuli to improvement
- strict compliance with rules and standards concerning the equipment, conditions and motion forms, which provides for quantifiability and comparability of scores

The objective of chess is to checkmate the king. What does it mean? It means that the king is in check by a piece and it cannot block the check, move to another square, or capture the checking piece. In order to achieve this objective one must play a game of chess methodically. In early stage of a game we should not strive for an instant checkmate or for gaining the winning advantage; instead, we should act in a well-planned, methodical way, step by step, trying to get the upper hand in terms of positional and material advantage and eventually

to checkmate the opponent's king [Bronstein 1989]. In case of beginners and unexperienced players the attempts towards finishing the game quickly end in failure. Their hasty and risky movements weaken their position, and their chances of winning are infinitesimal, even in games with players of moderate tournament experience and little chess knowledge. In chess, methodicalness is crucial; in other sports, like volleyball, handball or basketball, you can lose three points and win the next five, defeating the opponents, but in chess one erroneous move leads to a disadvantageous position and the disadvantageous position limits or prevents good moves. Also your home training should be methodical and systematic. Champions methodically work on combinations, strategies, tactics, opening moves, middlegame and endgame up to 12 hours a day.

As for the evident element of competition, it is included in the immediate duel of two players who, facing each other at the same table, over the same chessboard, and by the same clock, strictly follow the exact rules of FIDE and the Polish Chess Association [Gizycki, Litmanowicz 1986].

Conclusion

Having examined chess from the perspective of the features of *sport* included in M. Demel's definition, we can say that

- chess satisfy all the requirements imposed by Demel's definition of sport
- only the requirement concerning the motional character of sport activities arouses some controversies
- the other requirements are met by chess undoubtedly

In the light of the above-presented analyses and facts we can state with firmness and responsibility that chess must find its place within recognized sports.

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Szachy z perspektywy definicji sportu

Słowa kluczowe: szachy, sport, definicja, cechy, analiza

Streszczenie

Poniższy artykuł pokazuje, że szachy w oparciu o definicję pojęcia *sport* kwalifikują się do nazywania *sportem*. Termin *sport* pochodzi od łacińskiego słowa *disporto* a jako pierwszy do języka pisanego wprowadzili go Anglicy w XVI wieku. W Polsce terminu użyto po raz pierwszy dwa wieki później [Dziubiński 2003]. Należy interesujące nas zjawisko według nauki o sporcie potraktować w kategoriach opisowych i analitycznych [Krawczyk 2000]. Wiedza teoretyczna obejmuje całokształt sądów na dany temat, a teoria naukowa tylko

te, które wyjaśniają w tym przypadku *sport* z określonego punktu widzenia [Grabowski 1999]. Poniżej autor omawia złożoność wskazania jednej definicji pojęcia *sport* (a jest kilka ujęć teoretycznych) i dlatego przedstawia każdą z osobna. Uprawianie sportu ściśle związane jest z modelowaniem ludzkiego ciała. K. Heinemann określa sport jako sposób na manipulację, ruch, kontrolę, technikę i ekspresję ciałem [Heinemann 1989]. Sportowe zachowania dla niego zawsze mają charakter działań fizycznych. Sport zmienia wygląd zewnętrzny oraz świadomość własnego ciała.

Dla Komisji Wspólnot Europejskich sport w Białej Księdze Na Temat Sportu (rozumiany w ten sposób wzorując się za Radą Europy) oznacza: wszelkie formy aktywności fizycznej, które poprzez uczestnictwo doraźne lub zorganizowane, stawiają sobie za cel wypracowanie lub poprawienie kondycji fizycznej i psychicznej, rozwój stosunków społecznych lub osiągnięcie wyników sportowych na wszelkich poziomach. Zgodnie z

ustawą sport to wszelkie formy aktywności fizycznej, które przez uczestnictwo doraźne lub zorganizowane wpływają na wypracowanie lub poprawienie kondycji fizycznej i psychicznej, rozwój stosunków społecznych lub osiągnięcie wyników sportowych na wszelkich poziomach. Warto przy tym zauważyć, że odstąpiono od podziału sportu na kwalifikowany, amatorski, czy też zawodowy. Na potrzeby dalszych rozważań teoretycznych autor przyjmuje definicję *sportu* M. Demela, jako najbardziej dojrzałą, interesującą, rozbudowaną i dającą szerokie pole do dalszej analizy. Odnosząc się do poszczególnych cech konstytuujących sformułowane pojęcie autorstwa M. Demela autor podejmuje teoretyczne rozważania, czy szachy predestynują do miana *dyscypliny sportowej*.

Następnie na podstawie rozbudowanej definicji pojęcia autor dokonuje próby udowodnienia, że szachy mieszczą się w ramach ujęć naukowych określających działania zakwalifikowane jako sport.