

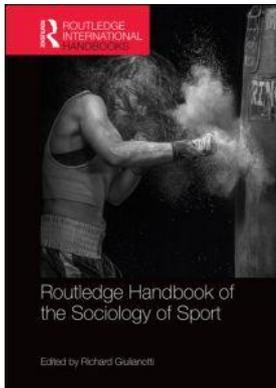
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### **The Functionalist Perspective on Sport**

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### 3

# THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON SPORT

*Tim Delaney*

The defending Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles Kings were trailing 3–2 late in the third period of their Game 2, 2013 second-round playoff series against the San Jose Sharks and were without two star players (Jarret Stoll and Anze Kopitar) due to injuries sustained earlier in the game when suddenly the Kings rallied to score two goals in a 22-second time span as the clock wound down. In the post-game interview with the NBC Sports Network, Kings captain Dustin Brown was asked how it was possible for the team to persevere without two integral players. Brown replied, ‘It’s stick with the system. When top guys go down it’s an opportunity for guys to step in.’ Brown was promoting an adage common in sports – play within the system and good things will happen. A further implication of Brown’s comment and the systems approach to sport (and life in general) is the idea that players are replaceable as long as every player on the team plays within the system. Playing within the system is reflective of the functionalist perspective, especially the system analysis (to be discussed later) promoted by Talcott Parsons.

In this chapter, we will explore the functionalist perspective of sport. We will find that while functionalism and its variations are mostly out of vogue in contemporary social science, the theory, especially the concept of a social system, is actually quite applicable to the study of sport.

## **The functionalist perspective**

Our look at the functionalist perspective begins by highlighting the ‘functional’ component of the theory, followed by a definition of functionalism and then an examination of its application to the social institution of sport.

### ***The ‘functional’ component***

The basic premise of the functionalist perspective is that people, social institutions, social systems, and nearly every aspect of society is evaluated according to its functionality; that is to say, ‘Is it functional?’ Consider, for example, these everyday scenarios: we replace consumer items when they stop working or are outdated; we switch banks, phone carriers, and the like when the original vendor’s service is poor (dysfunctional); we may end relationships (personal and professional) when they are no longer positive (functional); civil works projects (e.g. road, bridge, and airport construction) are evaluated based on their functionality; and we evaluate

government agencies and social institutions on their ability to meet their goals, an indicator of functionality.

Sports teams are also evaluated on their ability to meet their goals. Team owners evaluate everyone in their organization based on their functionality. Sports fans and spectators evaluate players, managers, and even owners on their ability to field a winning team. Many fans prefer a certain style (e.g. defensive-minded, offensive-minded, entertaining performances, 'flair players') from their favourite team. However, even if the team does not play in the preferred style, fans will continue to cheer for their team so long as they keep winning. The implication of the sport cliché – 'It's better to win ugly than to lose pretty' – is that any victory, even a dull one, is preferred to an entertaining defeat. In this manner, the ends justify the means. Thus, any sport performance that yields a victory is functional and preferred over the alternative (a defeat). And so it goes with most scenarios in life. If something is functional, it provides a victory, of sorts, and that is what most people are content with: functional and successful outcomes.

We seem to expect, perhaps even take for granted, that items (e.g. consumer products) and people will behave in a functional manner. Even if we are not conscious of it, most people seem to prefer a certain amount of predictability. We are certainly reminded of this idea any time something dysfunctional, such as a power outage or act of terrorism, occurs in our lives. It is during times of dysfunctional interruptions to the social system that people seem to crave stability the most. We want to get back to 'normal'. These cravings for stability and equilibrium in the social system are among the fundamental aspects of functionalism.

The functionalist perspective was promoted by the earliest sociologists, including Auguste Comte (the person who coined the term 'sociology'), Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Of particular relevance here is Comte's (1851) *organic analogy* wherein he compared society to an organism because each consisted of many parts, all functioning for the survival of the whole entity. Spencer (1860) also utilized an 'organic analogy' and promoted the idea that societies, like organisms, have many system needs; if these needs are not met, the system (organism or society) risks dissolution. It is up to the social system then, to find from the environment, the necessary materials to survive. Spencer termed this process *requisite functionalism* (Turner 2003).

Durkheim viewed society as a social system with its parts (social institutions) contributing to the functioning stability of the whole (society). Each part struggles to maintain stability. When all parts reach stability, the system is stable and therefore functional. Durkheim, like Comte, pointed out, however, that societies, as social systems, are not static and are therefore subject to change at any time. All of the parts of a social system are interconnected and each individual part, as well as the social system as a whole, attempts to meet its respective goals in order to function effectively and efficiently. Durkheim's (1973/1914) view on functionalism is summarized in this quote: 'A great number of our mental states, including some of the most important ones, are of social origin. In this case then, it is the whole that, in a large measure, produces the part; consequently, it is impossible to attempt to explain the whole without explaining the part – without explaining, at least, the part as a result of the whole' (1973/1914: 149).

Max Weber had a significant influence on Talcott Parsons's development of structural functionalism (to be discussed later). Weber had emphasized the role of social systems on human interactions. Parsons (1966) agreed, and concluded that an action system had to be incorporated into any grand theory designed to explain human behaviour and any analysis of how society exists. A social action theory applied to sport would examine the social structure of the sport in question, the network of entities found within the sport (e.g. a sport league or sport team), and also the behaviour of participants within the social system. Functionalists would point out, for example, that when players agree to 'play within a system', they do so at the expense of their own individual style of play for the sake of the whole (the team).

### ***Defining functionalism***

While early sociological theory was dominated by the thoughts and concepts of individual social thinkers, grand theories or 'schools of thought' have dominated the field since the mid-twentieth century. Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber influenced the creation of the first major sociological school of thought, initially, and generically, known as *functionalism*. With a focus on social systems and entire societies, it is clear that functionalism is a macrosociological theory. At its core, functionalism has two basic assumptions. The first is the idea of interdependent parts, where all of society's social institutions (e.g. religion, politics, economics, education, family, sport, and leisure) are linked together and function independently but with the greater good of the whole in mind (Delaney 2014). As Levin (1991: 76) explains, 'Functionalism begins with the idea that any stable system (such as the human body) consists of a number of different, but interrelated, parts that operate together to create an overall order.' Any change in one institution inevitably leads to changes in other institutions. In order to function properly, the system seeks equilibrium, or stability. Equilibrium allows for a smoothly running system that can function at peak levels. Thus, when one team player falls to injury, the next player must be ready to step in. Coaches who implement a 'system' will have back-up players with similar styles to starters in the hope that the team can 'function' in a stable fashion (equilibrium) even without all of its starting players. Of course, such an approach only works if the back-up players are as good as the starters, but this is not always the case.

The second fundamental aspect of the functionalist approach involves the shared 'culture' (basic values and norms) across people in a society, system, or sports team. Functionalists propose that a general agreement on basic values and morality issues allows systems to function properly. In an attempt to maintain equilibrium and reduce the risk of dissolution, members of social systems are encouraged to conform to these core values and norms (Delaney 2014). On sports teams, players are expected to follow the rules and norms dictated by management and the coaching staff. When players lose faith in the system, they challenge the prevailing culture. In professional sports it is often coaches or team officials who lose their jobs when their team is losing and dissent takes place. There are occasions, of course, where individual players are singled out as violators of the prevailing culture, and they may find themselves traded, released, or with playing time dramatically reduced.

### ***Functionalism applied to sport***

Sport, as a social institution composed of social systems with interrelated parts and a plurality of individual and group actors interacting with one another, lends itself to functionalist analysis (Delaney and Madigan 2009). Interestingly, in the early 1970s, just as functionalism was being overtaken by other sociological theories such as conflict and feminist approaches, Harry Edwards was playing a critical role in creating the field of sport sociology (Edwards 1973). Many of the first sport sociologists (for example, Allardt 1970; Wohl 1970; Lüschen 1970; Gruneau 1975; and Sage 1979) described sport 'in functionalist terms as supportive of the social order' (Figler and Whitaker 1991: 28). Stevenson and Nixon (1972) detailed five general functions by which sport helps the social system maintain equilibrium and operate smoothly and efficiently:

- 1 Socio-emotional function – Sport provides opportunities for conflict and tension management and release, camaraderie and community bonding, and ritualistic behaviours that people find comforting.

- 2 Socialization – People learn society’s expectations through the socialization process, and cultural values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Sport serves as a significant agent of socialization.
- 3 Social integration – A commonly cited function of this is its ability to provide opportunities for diverse groups and individuals to interact with one another. Functionalists ignore, however, sport’s ability to create ‘us versus them’ allegiances, which also sow the seeds of conflict between different factions of fans (as well as players).
- 4 Political functions – The role of politics and sport is both functional and dysfunctional. The singing of the national anthem before sporting events is among the more obvious manifest functions of politics in action within the sports world. Political leaders routinely utilize opportunities to associate themselves with winners and champions in an effort to bask in the glow of victorious others.
- 5 Social mobility – Functionalists argue that sport provides individuals with opportunities to improve their socio-economic status. Sport does provide for social mobility that is both direct (through professional sport participation) and indirect (such as through college scholarships for young athletes, leading to better job market opportunities).

The functionalist argument is generally endorsed by those who support sport and sport participation. Sport, as a social institution, is reinforced in many other social institutions such as the family, education system, workplace, community associations, and so on. For example, friends and family find that sport provides valuable bonding opportunities. Playing catch with a parent is almost like a rite of passage for most Americans. Playing soccer serves this role for many parents and children across the globe. Functionalists claim that sport fans bond with one another and form a sense of a collective, inclusive community. Volger and Schwartz (1993: 6) argue that sport is so strongly endorsed by most people in American society that it has been given nearly ‘sacred status’ and that the majority of people feel that sport is ‘compatible with American values’. As a result, sport is viewed as having a positive function in society. Among other things, sport:

- 1 Transmits cultural values.
- 2 Is educational.
- 3 Provides a release for physical and psychological pressures.
- 4 Provides a feeling of group membership.
- 5 Provides a means of social mobility.
- 6 Generates a sense of personal competition.

(Volger and Schwartz, 1993: 6)

The idea that sport serves as a means of uniting diverse people, provides opportunities to reaffirm camaraderie and bonds of friendship, can unite people as an inclusive community, and is a valued social institution, is still touted today by a wide variety of sport adherents, including those who use the functionalist perspective. In 2010, Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General, wrote an opinion piece in *The Guardian* (26 April 2010) wherein he promoted the ability of sport to transform nations, communities, and individuals. Annan was referring specifically to South Africa, the host for the 2010 World Cup, when he wrote, ‘At a time when war, violence and ethnic and religious tensions continue to obscure our common humanity, the World Cup has the real potential to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes.’ There are countless numbers of people and organizations that also utilize the functionalist perspective on the value of sport as a social institution.

With a general functionalist perspective established, we can shift our attention to structural functionalism, a specific variation of functionalism created in the 1950s by Harvard professor Talcott Parsons.

### **Structural functionalism**

A basic element of the sociological perspective in general involves the notion that humans reflect the social environment in which they were raised. That is to say, we are all products of our upbringing, life experiences and circumstances, and learning opportunities both formal (education) and informal. Social theories also reflect the climate of their times. The structural functionalist approach of Parsons certainly reflects the era in which he lived. The United States, like other Western nations, enjoyed relative societal calm and prosperity during the post-World War II era. 'Structural-functional sociology mirrored these real-life developments. It emphasized societal stability and the match between institutions like the economy, the family, the political system, and the value system' (Garner 2000:312).

Parsons's structural functionalist perspective has a dual focus on the structural forces that shape human behaviour and the means and ways that the social system addresses societal needs. Parsons proposed that social systems strive for stability like functionalism at its core. 'Parsons argued that the overall system and subsystems of which it is composed work together to form a balanced, stable whole and that the system naturally tends toward stability rather than toward disorder' (Levin 1991:77). Parsons argued that societies must strive for stability or equilibrium if they are to stand the test of time. Individual athletes, sport leagues, franchise sport teams, and college and university athletics all seek this same goal – successful longevity. At the societal level, structural functionalists argued that there must be some sense of social order and interdependence among society's various social institutions. The relative socio-political conservative nature of American society during the 1950s provided the perfect backdrop for Parsons to create his theoretical approach and to witness its flourish, before the general civil unrest of the mid- to-late 1960s changed Americans' outlook on society.

### ***Social action theory and sport***

Human behaviour within the social system is addressed in Parsons's social action theory. He made clear his commitment to empirical research as the guiding force behind his theory: 'This body of theory, the "theory of social action", is not simply a group of concepts with their logical interrelations. It is a theory of empirical science, the concepts of which refer to something beyond themselves. . . . True scientific theory is not the product of idle "speculation", or spinning out the logical implications of assumptions, but of observation, reasoning and verification, starting with the facts and continually returning to the facts' (1949/1937: v). Parsons acknowledged the subjective nature of human activity and therefore wished to make clear the distinction between the concepts of *action* (an active, creative response) and *behaviour* (a perfunctory response to stimuli). Action options depend upon the actor's knowledge of her situation, which includes knowledge of the probable effects of the available choices (Delaney 2014). Parsons (1949/1937) insisted that in order to qualify as an action theory, the subjective aspect of human activity cannot be ignored.

When applied to sport, the subjective nature of social action addresses the issue of why sport is appealing to some, but not to all people. In sport-crazed nations, in most parts of the world, there are millions of people who passionately follow their favourite athletes and sport teams; and yet, others have little to no interest. But this is true for all social institutions. Religion and

spiritual belief, for example, provide comfort and meaning to their adherents, while others view such faith as irrational ways of looking at the world.

Parsons's *social action theory* involves two essential components, the *actor* and the *act*. The actor is viewed as a human individual and the most reducible component of a social system. The purpose, or function, of the actor is to strive and attain a goal (Parsons 1949). The pursuit of a goal generally involves the actor making choices. As Bourricaud (1984) explains, the actor does not make random choices; instead, these choices are governed by logical considerations, which may vary from case to case. Logical considerations are made within the context of operating within a specific social system; therefore, what may be logical in one setting may not be in another. The actor must heed and anticipate possible system constraints (as spelled out in Parsons's four functional imperatives, discussed below) in the pursuit of goals. The actor needs to be aware that the social system, because it seeks stability and equilibrium, requires (or desires) that actors work within a structured framework. Structured behaviour creates a *normative orientation* among actors which results in patterned behaviour. Over time, structured, normative behaviour leads to the establishment of a *system of culture* wherein normative behaviour becomes routine.

The second component of the social action theory is the 'act' which, for Parsons, (1949/1937) has four basic components. First, an act involves actors engaging in some sort of behaviour. Second, actors organize their activity in order to reach an intended goal. Third, the action engaged in by actors is predicated on given situations at the time of the behaviour. Fourth, there exists the possibility of randomness in any given social act that may lead actors to change their course of action as they strive to meet a goal.

Parsons (1949/1937) explained that an act is always a process in time, and that the concept *end* always implies a future reference to a state (or situation) that does not yet exist. Actions consist of the structures and processes by which human beings form meaningful intentions and more or less successfully implement them in concrete situations (Parsons 1966).

Parsons's theory of social action also involves four steps: motivation, means, overcoming conditions that impede progress, and working with the social system. We can apply his social action theory to sport participation with an end goal of becoming a financially successful professional athlete. Step one involves the actor being motivated to work hard enough to become a professional athlete. Furthermore, because it is very difficult to become a financially successful athlete, the motivation should begin at an early age. Finding the means to reach the desired goal will also be challenging as money for equipment and travel, sufficient free time for sport training, and a support system are among the many variables that may hamper attempts to reach this goal. The third step involves dealing with the conditions, or obstacles that may hinder reaching the goal. These could include the freedom from other obstacles (e.g. raising a family), the ability to work with coaches, trainers, and teammates, and the potential lack of skill elite enough to make the actor into a professional athlete. And finally, the actor must be able to work within the social system, such as following administrative rules and procedures, passing drug tests, and meeting eligibility requirements. Working within the social system is often quite challenging and helps to explain why many people may not attain their desired athletic goals.

### **Functional imperatives (AGIL) and sport**

I stated earlier that, for Parsons, the actor must heed and anticipate possible system constraints as spelled out by his four *functional imperatives*. These four imperatives are often referred to simply as AGIL.

The functional imperatives are a set of conditions that Parsons believed must be met if systems of action are to be stable and effective. Functional imperatives may be viewed as potential

problems to the social system, and as such each must be addressed to secure the stable operation of the social system. The four imperatives are: Adaptation (A); Goal attainment (G); Integration (I); and Latency (L). The AGIL principle can be applied to the sports world:

- 1 Adaptation – Social systems must secure sufficient resources from the environment and distribute them throughout the system. In the sports world, sport league, franchise sport teams, and colleges and universities must generate more revenue than they spend. Professional sport teams must find a way to balance very high salaries for a few elite athletes while leaving enough money for the remaining team members. In addition, while social systems seek stability, change does occur; consequently, members of social systems must learn to adapt to changes.
- 2 Goal Attainment – The social system must clearly establish the goals that individual members are expected to pursue. Sport teaches participants that working hard leads to victory, and therefore success, the ultimate goal of nearly every social system. Sport is consumed with tracking and recording the successes and failures of its participants, particularly through statistics that provide empirical evidence.
- 3 Integration – This functional imperative involves the regulation and coordination of actors and subsystems within the greater social system in order to keep it functioning properly (Delaney 2014). Sport leagues must regulate and coordinate all of the participating sport franchises; team managers and coaches must do the same with players (actors); and sporting events provide people with the opportunity to bond as a group and reaffirm a sense of community. Sport also provides actors with a sense of social identification and personal identity.
- 4 Latency – This consists of two related problems: tension management (internal tensions and actors' sense of strain) and pattern maintenance (displaying 'appropriate' behaviour). Proper socialization is supposed to solve these problems. In sport, athletes and fans are taught to accept well-defined authority structures, such as coaches, team management, and security personnel in stadiums. Sport also provides spectators and participants with socially approved venues for venting their aggression and excessive energy. Very few work environments involve workers being booed, or cheered, as they perform their duties, but such is life in the sports world.

This concise review of social action theory and functional imperatives demonstrates their relevancy to the sport world. Our next topic, the social system, represents the cornerstone of structural functionalist thought and it, too, is quite relevant to the study of sport.

## **The social system**

As articulated by Parsons's structural functionalist perspective, the *social system* is a network of inter-related parts, or subsystems, arranged in such a way as to accommodate the interaction of a plurality of individual actors who are oriented to a given situation and striving to achieve goals.

### ***Parsons and the social system***

In his book *The Social System*, Parsons (1951) attempted to expand and clarify his social action theory by integrating the role of structure and processes of social systems and their effect on the actor. Parsons believed it was necessary for social systems to have a sound *social structure* that strives for stability in order to function at peak levels in its attempt to coordinate subsystems efficiently.

'Parsons argued that the overall system and subsystems of which it is composed work together to form a balanced, stable whole and that the system naturally tends toward stability rather than toward disorder' (Levin 1991: 77). In addition to subsystems, a social system consists of the interaction of a plurality of individual actors oriented to a situation (e.g. a sport team consisting of players, coaches, and staff). 'Reduced to the simplest possible terms, then, a social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect' (Parsons 1951: 5). It is important to recognize that social systems are designed to continue to exist even as individual actors leave. For example, as members of a university sports team graduate, transfer, or drop out, they are replaced by other individuals. The same scenario is played out in nearly every social system, including universities, corporations, offices, and so on. This cycle of individuals coming and going continues year after year and yet the social system (the team, the league) manages to maintain itself (with varying degrees of success).

Although social systems are quite diverse (some are small, some large; some are complex, others relatively simplistic), a number of general assumptions about social systems can be made:

- 1 Systems are made of order and the interdependence of parts.
- 2 The system and all the subsystems strive for equilibrium (normal activity, a self-maintaining order).
- 3 Systems are generally static or move in a progressively deliberate manner.
- 4 A disruption in the 'normal flow' of one subsystem can cause a disturbance throughout the whole system.
- 5 Systems have boundaries, which may involve actual physical space or time and distance.

(Delaney 2005:48–49)

Social actors represent a critical element of social systems as they are the ones who actually operate, coordinate, and supervise the processes involved in order to assure maximum functionality.

### ***Sport and the social system***

The social system concept is very relevant to sport. In fact, the more common clichés expressed by coaches and players alike involve some variation of 'playing within the system'. (Note: In May 2013, a Google search of 'Sports: Buy into the System' yielded more than 3.7 billion results.) The introductory story in this chapter, regarding the Los Angeles Kings 'sticking with the system', provided one such example.

Coaches routinely attempt to implement a system. This system is generally the one they feel most confident in, although there are times when a coach may change his or her system to fit the particular talent on the team. The coach will introduce the system to players and then proceed to teach the system to the team. In team sports, systems require that all players act together. There are times when if just one person steps outside the system it can become ineffective, dysfunctional. Systems rely on the collectivity, the whole, not individual stars (parts). In sports, like any other situation, a system is all about its people and the willingness of those involved to 'buy in'. Clemson University head football coach Dabo Swinney's system involves his players concentrating on their explicit tasks while downplaying the specific opponent at hand. Swinney's system is more about his own team, how they prepare and execute, and less about the opponent. Swinney said, 'Everybody is a faceless, nameless opponent' (Bradley 2012).

Team players are likely to see more playing time and greater success when they buy into a coach's system. Such was the case for Kosta Koufos of the Denver Nuggets (NBA).

A benchwarmer for much of the 2012–13 season, Koufos began to dominate toward the end of the season. When asked about this success, the 7-foot-tall Koufos explained, ‘The biggest thing is just playing within the system. . . . I feed off our guards. They do such a great job, pushing the ball, driving and dishing off to the big guys. That’s the biggest thing’ (*Denver Post*, 18 April 2013).

A coach’s system will work if it is based on sound principles and so long as players work as a team. All systems, in team sports, require teammates to work together as a functioning whole, rather than as a collection of individuals. There are times when players refuse to buy into the system. The results are almost always negative: the team loses, players and coaches may lose their jobs, and fans become discouraged and upset. By the end of the 2011–12 NBA season, it had become clear that the New York Knicks players had lost faith in coach Mike D’Antoni’s system. Feeling the heat, D’Antoni resigned before the end of the season. The following day, when asked for his opinion about why his coach resigned, Amar’e Stoudemire claimed, ‘Everyone wasn’t buying into this system’ (*New York Daily News*, 15 March 2012). In a controversial move (Lakers fans and players were unhappy with the decision), D’Antoni was hired by the Los Angeles Lakers early in the following season when their season-opening coach was fired. Once again, players complained about D’Antoni’s system and the Lakers had a miserable season (for them), losing in the first round of the 2013 NBA playoffs.

Some coaches utilize a system that emphasizes offense, while other coaches focus on defense. In American team sports it is often stated that offense sells tickets (because offense is deemed more entertaining) but defense wins championships (the ability to stop other teams from scoring is often the key to success). Thus, as discussed earlier in this chapter, fans may prefer an offensive-minded team (because the games are more exciting), but they will cheer for a defensive-minded team so long as they win (winning ‘ugly’). Dave Arseneault, a men’s basketball coach at Grinnell College (Iowa), provides us with an extreme example of an offensive-minded system. Grinnell’s goal is to have a player shoot within 12 seconds of getting the ball; the style demands fresh legs, and the Pioneers typically substitute every 60 seconds or so (Meredith 2012). This system worked out well for Jack Taylor as one night in November 2012 he set the record for points in a game with 138. Taylor hoisted a mind-boggling 108 shots, one every 20 seconds; he missed 56 shots (Meredith 2012). In defensive-minded systems, the offensive players are generally asked not to lose the game, rather than to try and win. Such was the case at North Carolina State when football coach Dave Doeren asked his quarterback (during the 2013 spring training) to manage the game by making sure he did not put the team in positions to hurt the defense. When asked about his quarterback, Coach Doeren stated that he needed him to ‘play within the system’ and not to ‘screw things up’ (Adelson 2013).

The social system requires stability and equilibrium among all of its parts; as a result, a disruption in one subsystem may cause a ripple effect of problems in others. For example, if a head coach at a major university abruptly and unexpectedly quits to take a new position with another team during the height of the time period when incoming recruits (e.g. college transfers and high school seniors) are expected to sign their ‘letter of intent’ (a written commitment to attend and play for a particular college the following season), chaos may ensue. Such was the case at Syracuse University in January 2013 when head football coach Doug Marrone quit his post in order to coach the NFL team Buffalo Bills, taking with him many of his assistants. Some of the university’s proposed student-athlete recruits, who had given verbal commitments to play at Syracuse, changed their minds citing the uncertainty of the football program. (Realizing he was about to lose many more recruits, the athletic director, Daryl Gross, moved quickly and hired a coach who would continue to implement Syracuse’s high-powered, offensive-minded playing system, known as a spread/West Coast hybrid, a wide-open, pass-first philosophy of football, that had just set a school record for offensive scoring the previous season). Upon introducing

the new head football coach, Scott Shafer, Gross informed the media (and de facto potential recruits), ‘We have put our focus on the system we’re running and not so much the guy running it. We will not have a new guy with a new system. Scott is committed to the current system. It will continue to be fast, up-tempo, spreading it out at times, going West Coast at times and running the ball when that is working’ (*The Post-Standard*, 10 January 2013). At Syracuse, the system remained and actors were deemed replaceable. Time will determine whether that strategy worked or not.

These short case-studies represent a mere sampling of the nearly endless examples of the systems approach to sport. If any one aspect of the functionalist perspective stands above the rest to demonstrate the relevancy of this theoretical approach, it is the social system component.

### Criticisms of the functionalist perspective

The functionalist perspective has been attacked by proponents of nearly every other theoretical perspective. Among the criticisms of this theory are its conservative nature and perceived inability to explain social change. The functionalist focus on how social systems attempt to maintain equilibrium leads its proponents to ignore conflict. People do not agree on all the values and beliefs of the dominant society and as a result, functionalism is criticized for failing to acknowledge socio-economic inequalities that lead to different perspectives of the social system (Delaney 2014). Because of its conservative nature and focus on the status quo, functionalism is also criticized for ignoring such social patterns as ‘discrimination, exploitation, and political dominations by elites or ruling classes who have a vested interest in maintaining their power and prestige’ (Nixon and Frey 1996: 10). The functionalist approach also ignores the reality that sport, like all social institutions, is a social construct amenable to change. Despite these criticisms, the staying power of functionalism as a prominent sociological theory cannot be denied and its relevancy to sport is equally intact.

Although grand theories are not currently in vogue, functionalism is an approach that helps to explain large social institutions like sport. As a proponent of the dominant culture of a given society, functionalism is a relevant theory to the study of sport because this institution generally reflects the key values and norms of a given society. That sport’s governing bodies are generally intolerant of individualist behaviours – those athletes who go against the norms of the social institution – is a testament to the status quo emphasis of functionalism. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the functionalist perspective is its explanation of the social system and the manner in which players and coaches work within a social system.

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