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### Sporting Sounds

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## SPORTING SOUNDS

*Ben Powis and Thomas F. Carter*

This chapter considers some of the ways that sound forms an important aspect of sport by paying attention to how the senses play roles in performance and consumption – a range of topics that is almost always taken for granted, if not actively ignored, throughout sport studies. Nevertheless, a casual perusal of sport makes it abundantly clear that even the simple act of spectating at a local sporting contest encompasses more of the sensorium than “watching sport”. The auditory is a crucial element of any sporting experience. From the distinctive syncopated pattern of a table tennis rally to the visceral grunt of the front rows locking horns in a rugby scrum, the experience of playing and watching sport is made up of a number of unique soundscapes. A soundscape is a distinct form of “auditory weather” that contributes overall to each unique sporting experience. As the acoustical environment changes, sometimes dramatically and suddenly, in a sports event, it drastically affects the overall experience and atmosphere. Thus it behoves us to push for the development of an acoustemology (Feld 1996) along the lines of meteorology, a scientific approach that explicitly addresses how “sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth” in sporting environments.

In order to take an acoustemological approach, this chapter focuses on the sounds of sport from an expanding range of vantage points. Our approach is to start with the athletes themselves and provide an overview of the ways in which sound is acknowledged to play a role in their performance. Our initial discussion then considers the bodily production and perception of embodied sounds. These initial comments consider both how sound is used to assist athletic performance and how sound is used strategically to impede an opponent’s performance. From these, we expand our auditory range to examine the relationship between the sounds found on, and emanating from, the field of competition with those found throughout the arenas of sport. In our considerations of the spatial enclosure of the field of play, the interactions between spectators and athletes become more apparent through the implementation of crowd noise both in response to athletic actions and the crowd’s deliberate proactive productions of noise to impede an opponent’s acts. Noise itself is one aspect; the other end of the spectrum is equally pertinent. The role of silence and its attentive norms by certain kinds of spectating crowds is also compelling. In both cases, the deliberate projection of deafening noise and music or the equally stunning use of silence to influence athlete performance forms part of the broader soundscape of any sporting spectacle. Moving further afield, we then move away from the materiality of stadia

and playing fields themselves to the consumption of mediated sounds through electronic media and consider how sound transforms the consumption of sport-related entertainments.

Throughout this chapter, we draw upon a range of interdisciplinary material and our own research, including unpublished fieldnotes, that make use of the sounds of sport-related practices to demonstrate the myriad ways that the overall sporting soundscape undulates and transforms in relation to its spatial configurations. The generation of sound and its perceivers affects not only the atmosphere of an event but also the performance of the athletes as well. Thus, sound affects actual performance as well as influences the aesthetics of the spectacle.

### Embodied sounds

The very breath of the athlete and its passage creates an individualized environmental experience. Listening to and identifying one's own respiratory patterns provides constant and almost instantaneous feedback (Hockey 2006). Wacquant describes such sounds of the "rhythmic puffing, hissing, sniffing, blowing, and groaning of each athlete" (2006: 71) as athletic proficiency is gained through repeated drills and sparring sessions. In sports like boxing, the guttural whoosh of forced exhalation followed by the teary-eyed gasping of having one's wind knocked out is readily apparent by an athlete's inability to immediately continue or speak due to a lack of air. Active self-evaluation of respiratory patterns is especially important for athletes who suffer with asthma (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014). By attending to the auditory feedback during participation, in combination with previous knowledge of their condition, asthmatic athletes can recognize the early warning signs indicated through their levels of breathing. These sorts of pulmonary resonances make not only the athlete but also coaching and medical staff aware of how the athlete should be physically feeling.

These sorts of immediate corporeal sounds also provide feedback to how an athlete's current performance is going based on the timber and tone of striking an object. A boxer describes the beginnings of a training session where the sound of her fist striking the pads tells her she is using the proper technique: "After the warm-up, when we get to the padwork, I feel ready, my body's hot and ready ... I hear the sounds of my technique hitting the pads – tap, tap, slam, slam, SLAM" (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015: 260). The sound of gloves crashing into bags can grip the boxer, becoming the dominant sense of training, while also serving as an indicator for how hard their training partners are exerting themselves, thus providing the boxer with further motivation to work harder (Spencer 2014: 241–244).

Carter's research on Cuban baseball similarly reinforced his own embodied knowledge as a baseball player (2008): the "crack" of the bat in baseball tells fielders the angle and force with which the ball has been struck long before the sight of the ball's velocity and trajectory is clear. A bat's material makes all the difference: a wooden bat "cracks" while an aluminum bat "pings". Yet the tone and timber of the collision of bat and ball is deeper and more visceral than a more marginally struck ball irrespective of the material used to strike the ball. These sounds are subtle, as Sparkes makes clear as he helps his son choose the correct cricket bat (2009: 22). The reverberations of the willow differ depending on where the bat is struck and the search for the largest "sweet spot" is found through auditory testing instead of visual or tactile inspection. Sound allows the listener to "know" the depths of an object in ways that sight or touch cannot. This learned skill of "agile listening" (Bull and Back 2003) attunes the athlete to specific sounds that then shape the "correct" actions to take, including which equipment to choose.

Those subtle sounds and the knowledge of what they portend is learned through many hours of practice. The athlete's body also generates sounds due to enormous physical exertion. Grunting with effort, howling with pain, or screaming with joy all are part of sport-related milieus.

While these nonverbal vocalizations are often an unconscious secondary effect of enacted physical efforts, the production of bodily noise, such as grunting, appears to increase the force with which an athlete might strike an object, whether this is a conscious decision to produce such noise or not (O'Connell et al. 2014). Furthermore, the "controversy" over "shrieking" female tennis players as being unfeminine (Geoghegan 2009) reveals more about the gendered norms of athletic comportment than it does about the effect such noise production has in masking the sorts of sounds identified in previous paragraph so as to delay an opponent's reaction to a shot. That grunting masks the sound of the ball striking the racquet's strings suggests there is a competitive advantage to be gained.

The use of sound to mask intent can also be reversed where sound is intentionally used to distract an opponent. A common form of this is the *Soto voce* insinuations and insults are a common form of this. It is a well-known activity at the bottom of a ruck or in the clinch of a scrum in rugby or a pile of athletes in American football. "Sledging" by either the wicket keeper or other fielders as a batsman returns to the crease in infamous in cricket. Similarly, a baseball catcher often talks to the batter in deliberate attempts to disrupt the batter's concentration. In all these cases some of the vitriol spewed forth is obscene, derogatory, and highly offensive, and in any other context would be considered utterly and inescapably racist, misogynist, or bigoted. "Getting in your opponent's head" is all-too-common throughout professional sports. This aspect of "gamesmanship" (Howe 2004; Evans 2007) is yet another example of how the tactical use of embodied sound can affect athletic performance. Specific sounds create potential competitive advantages.

### **Competitive sounds**

Sound does much more than provide an immediate corporeal feedback of, or distract from, an athlete's performance. Sound actually dictates the flow of competition. A referee's whistle indicates the start and stoppage of play in most team sports. A starting gun fired indicates the start of the race in athletics while a klaxon and the metallic slamming of gates opening are the first signs of a horse race beginning. Through habit, experience, and training, "auditory knowledge" (Rice 2010) of a particular sport is cultivated and becomes central to understanding both the sporting environment and the individual's own performance. This is especially evident in Powis' study of visually impaired cricketers (2018).

The cricketing soundscape is made up of both linguistic and non-linguistic audio with certain players featuring prominently. Listening is an active process of attaching meaning to particular sonic landmarks that allows the players to construct the space around them and also create specific strategies to use while playing. For example, the bowler must always ask that the batsman is ready and shout "Play" as they release the ball. The wicket keeper will assist the bowler, if totally blind, in aligning the delivery by calling their name behind the stumps before they bowl. Once the ball has been hit, the (partially sighted) wicketkeeper will provide a running commentary for all fielders in the path of the ball. The constant calls of the wicketkeeper are used in conjunction with the non-linguistic sounds of the ball, bat, or even thud of other player's footsteps to locate the ball when fielding. In a related fashion, a batsman uses sound to adjudicate the source, direction, and kind of delivery they can anticipate.

Such strategies necessitate an in-depth auditory knowledge of the distinctive elements of the cricketing soundscape. To the untrained ear, the sound of the bat striking the ball may only indicate the connection of the two objects but, to the visually impaired cricketer, it can indicate the type of shot played, the speed, the direction, and the amount of spin imparted on the ball.

The crack of bat, the snap of leather, the reverberations of violent collisions, shouts between athletes all manage ever shifting competitive contexts in sport. Coaches shouting instructions, referees' whistles, shouts of exultation or recrimination based on teammates' performances all contour the sporting experience whether we are discussing a small game on a village green or a professional encounter with thousands of spectators in attendance. Such sounds can reveal social relations between those involved in any given athletic performance.

### Spectacular sounds

No discussion of the sounds of sport would be complete without at least a mention of the crowds. Spectators provide the "atmosphere" and that atmosphere is primarily auditory rather than visual. The visuality of a sporting spectacle is focused on the athletes themselves whereas the "atmosphere" is a sensual conjuration of *communitas* that can be geared towards positive feelings of belonging or abject, sometimes violent expressions of a marginalized group (Armstrong 1998; Robson 2000; Swyers 2010). The creation of atmosphere is central to a team or individual athlete benefiting from "home field advantage" and the noise generated by the crowd can be especially influential. Nevill et al. (2002) explore the effect of "home field advantage" within football and how the crowd's performance influences the referee's decision making. According to the study, a referee is much more lenient towards the home team and is clearly swayed by the presence of a noisy home support. Referees' levels of uncertainty and indecision increase the more supporters vociferously disagree with the referee's decisions. Avoiding making decisions that may displease home supporters and not being victim to their collective sonic wrath becomes a motivating factor for the officials. The collective mass of noise created in the stands, frequently described as the "twelfth man," has an effect on the performance of the players, officials, and, ultimately, the match's outcome.

Such "home field advantage" does not exist in the same way at individual events, such as professional golf and tennis (Nevill et al. 1997). The social context of crowd behavior in these sports differs considerably from the "stadium booming" of American team sports or the chanting found in the football grounds across Europe. In these instances, it is not the percussive force of thousands of voices all screaming in unison but the oppressive silence creating a pressurized environment where the absence of crowd noise accentuates the focus on the athlete's next act. Not only is silence expected, tennis umpires enforce it, demanding that the crowd restrain itself before play may resume.

Crowds strategically use sound, decisively and deliberately roaring and hushing depending on the circumstance. Carter found this acoustical interplay during fieldwork in North America that roofed stadia in particular became acoustic chambers by which the crowd alternated between torrential waves of sound and silence. During Major League Baseball playoff games between the Minnesota Twins and St. Louis Cardinals held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the partisan crowd actively participated in events by deliberately roaring the whole time their team was at bat, but were dedicatedly quiet when the home team was in the field. When roaring, the decibel levels were louder than standing 300 yards away from 727 engines at takeoff (Kates 1992). Players sitting next to each other on the bench did not even bother to talk to one another because they couldn't hear each other (Fimrite 1987) and in the crowd Carter could not hear his companion shouting directly into his ear when the crowd was "booming" the stadium. Yet, when the home team was fielding, the noise levels dropped so that you could hear the crack of the bat from over 400 feet away. That noisemaking is part gamesmanship is widely recognized as it is frequently considered poor form to make "distracting" noises when a fly half is lining up a penalty kick in rugby union. During fieldwork in Northern Ireland in 2000, Carter observed

Ulster Rugby supporters chastising teenage members of the crowd who shrilly whistled as the opponent's fly half lined up his penalty kick.

The crowd's purposeful, conscious use of sound to support its team or attempt to directly affect the outcome of athletic actions is one motivation for spectators' vocal productions. There is more to spectators' behavior, however, than "merely" attempting to influence the outcome. There are culturally specific norms of spectator behavior involved in any sporting contest that are specific to sport and culture (Kelly 1997). Around the world, many fan groups see themselves not as passive consumers of a commoditized sporting spectacle but as active, creative participants of the overall spectacle. Their chanting and singing helps to create the energetic, enveloping atmosphere of a celebratory event. Chanting and singing are not modern phenomena and have performed a variety of functions – religious, educational, militaristic over millennia (Schoonderwoerd 2011) – yet both chanting have a number of specific characteristics in modern sport. Back (2003) discusses the importance of song in structuring a sense of feeling in football stadia where the potentially sterile steel-structured space is bestowed a sense of place and identity through communal singing and the particular lyrics being sung by the supporters. The socialised nature of collective vocalizations not only provides support for the team or athlete, it communicates a shared identity of the group. For example, the *Çarşı*, the principal supporter group of Beşiktaş JK, act as an "acoustic community," constructing a shared space through the use of sonic rituals such as marching and chanting (Kytö 2011). A central aspect of this strategic identity creation displayed through the fans' songs and chants is a celebration of place. The dual purpose of such chants, like "I'm Scunthorpe 'til I die!", is to identify a heartfelt connection to a given place, often the stadium, and the denizens in it while inviting the excluded others to recognize this identity (Clark 2006: 500). Liverpool's famous Kop singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" or Millwall fans more infamously chanting "No One Likes Us! We Don't Care!" are clear indications of enduring loyalty to the club but also signifies amongst supporters a public declaration of belonging to persons and place. The auditory reinforcement of identity is not only self-affirming; it is a way of creating hostility towards opposition supporters. Such aggressive "calls to arms," however, can also emphasize other racist, sexist, and homophobic aspects of shared identities (Armstrong and Young 1999; Back 2003; Caudwell 2011). However, such vocalizations need not be confrontational. Some forms of chanting may be seen as a light-hearted invitation to provoke the opposition fans into song (Granstrom 2012).

### **Sound competition**

Spectators' creativity often generates much of the atmosphere that is so valued and lauded by a sport's authorities, the media broadcasters, and the other stakeholders in the overall spectacle. Whether through song, musical instruments, or another form of sonic act, the soundscapes created by supporters appear to influence the performance on the pitch. That energy and creativity, however, may not fit the desired sense of the spectacle's choreographers. These organic soundscapes are being forcibly altered to maintain their own ability to be heard and appreciated as a homogenizing trend feeds the global demands for sporting spectacle.

The rhythmic auditory peaks and troughs of certain events, such as cricket, are changing. Since the advent of Twenty20, a fast and furious shortened format aimed at a younger generation of fans contrasts with the placid, relaxed atmosphere of test match cricket. Nowhere have the norms of cricketing changed than in the Indian Premier League (IPL). Alongside the fireworks and the cheerleaders, the stadium's soundscape is deliberately controlled, providing an atmosphere in which loud is equated with good. Every pause in play is filled by an auditory assault, often a blast of a popular music track blasted at high decibels, that continues until the



bowler is ready to deliver the next ball. If the crowd's energy begins to waver, the recording of a specific trumpet riff blares around the ground that prompts the crowd to cheer and applaud. Rather than being an organic show of collective identity, the act of vocal support is becoming something instigated by television broadcasters to make their "product" even more marketable.

The IPL's spectacularization of the cricket crowd, alongside the increasing attempts to control crowd expression in choreographed and controlled manners around the world, reflects a broader trend identified in the globalization of sport (Giulianotti and Robertson 2007; Sage 2011), although the norms of global spectacularization might be more accurately identified as the Americanization of sport spectacle but not necessarily the sport itself. Officials' increasing attempts to ensure a full-throated, full-on entertainment that does not allow for a single moment of respite also shifts spectators from active participants to passive consumers of what is put before them. Spectator participation then is to be controlled and scripted by stadia officials instead of being organic and self-generated. Fans, of course, resist such restrictions in a variety of ways and these struggles are heard in sporting venues around the world. From the Barras Bravas in Buenos Aires (Antezana 2003), to the football stands in Mexico (Magazine 2007), to the grounds of Scotland (Bradley 1998), football fans in particular resist attempts to control their expressive participation during matches. The smuggling of banners, flares, and musical instruments into facilities, as well as confrontations with stewards and police, all demonstrate that the soundscape of a sporting event is not an uncontested, choreographed performance in the manner of a theatre play. And it is not only football.

When the Belfast Giants ice hockey team began in 2000, there was no history of ice hockey in Belfast, and thus no local knowledge of how to act at a match, never mind what the sport actually was (Carter 2011: 108). Given this ethnocentric presumption that the local audience lacked any knowledge of the sport, officials ensured that there was always something stimulating happening: loud music blaring, pre-recorded videos playing, and laser lights flashing after every whistle halting play. Announcements and videos explaining rules and officiating decisions were as loud as possible. Importing a North American model of professional sport spectacles, what the Canadian-led management did not count upon was the local norms of sport spectatorship. By the mid-point of the very first season, a group of fans self-organized into a drumming group. Fans serenaded players with chanting and drum cavalcades during play and in between action on the ice, but did not try to compete with the scoreboard's video and sound system between periods. They saw themselves as enhancing the overall atmosphere. However, after several matches where they played, musical instruments were barred on "safety grounds" as Giants' management claimed the drums prevented players from hearing the referee's whistle. The public backlash forced management to engage in negotiations over the roles of spectatorship. By the next season, an agreement was in place as to who, how, where, and when fans could "contribute" to the atmosphere, complete with a designated spot for the drumming group in the arena.

The attempts at regulating the generation and deployment of spectator acoustics is not limited to club or stadia officials operating in isolation. International Sport Federations have introduced a number of pieces of legislation worldwide to restrict, control, or otherwise restrain spectators' production of sound within a venue because it affects authorities' ability to control the script and affect the soundscapes of spectacles designed more for mediated than embodied consumption, in particular. The Marleybone Cricket Club, the English institution that for years acted as the international purveyor of cricket, and the national governing body, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), deliberately banned musical instruments during the 2000 West Indies cricket tour of England to ostensibly allow a better televised experience, though it was an obvious ploy to silence the distinctive calypso sounds of the away support (Gordon 2000). While that incident clearly was an act of gamesmanship, FIFA's banning of vuvuzelas, the distinctive

sound-making device used during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, at future international competitions (BBC 2010) demonstrates authorities' seriousness in controlling the auditory weather of an event. The banning of the Barmy Army's famed trumpeter, Billy Cooper, from Trent Bridge during the 2013 home Ashes series despite other cricket grounds relaxing their instrument ban (Goldstein 2013) further illustrates the (sometimes contradictory) attempts to control the sporting landscape. Sports administrators and media broadcasters are slowly accumulating the ability to shape the auditory weather of an event's atmosphere in terms of which components are permitted and at what point and what kind of spectator contributions should be made.

### **Concluding remarks**

One of the challenges within most social scientific approaches to sport is that sport is normally addressed strictly in terms of its structural elements and that the existential actuality of the athlete is inadequately acknowledged. Soundscapes' permutations and sounds' affective reverberations clearly shape the lived experience of social reality including sport-related experiences. The specific sporting sounds that emanate from athletes, crowds, and stadia all permeate the sporting experience in myriad currents. The simple recognition that sound plays an inextricable and important role in sport is an obvious yet vital acknowledgement. From the embodied sounds of athletic exertion to the interpersonal regulation in an athletic competition, sounds form a crucial element in the overall experience of playing sport.

The embodied sounds of sport touch on phenomenological concerns, the ideas of lived experiences and ways of being, not just as an individual self but as being-in-the-world. Paying attention to the sounds produced through a body's material engagement with its surrounding environs generates fascinating, complex examples of how human beings go about becoming athletes, enact their worlds, and create social realities. The nascent concern over embodied sounds found in sporting activities raises larger questions over how sound is used to create and reinforce notions of being.

The use of sound to regulate social behavior, both on the field of competition and in the stands, points to the ways in which sporting sounds compete to be heard. The privileging of certain sensory realms over others and certain aspects of a singular sensory realm, such as sound, over other aspects are crucial questions that bear further investigation in regards to the ways in which people create and experience sport. An acoustemological approach to sport is a needed development that will, at first, necessitate its incorporation into broader theoretical and methodological approaches. The use of sound in spectacle, particularly the power relations within the politics of spectacle, is one theoretical development. Methodologically, adopting an acoustemological approach opens up new forms of knowledge directly related to ways of being and to existing power relations related to questions of identity, disability, and capability. Incorporating sound into theoretical and methodological approaches can only enhance work being done while sound-centric studies will also lead to new understandings of sport.

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