

Soccer and Philosophy

Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential philosopher, was a big soccer fan, reports John Heilpern in a *Wall Street Journal* review of *Soccer and Philosophy*, a collection of essays edited by Ted Richards (6/9/10).

Sartre called the game “football,” of course, but in his “Critique of Dialectical Reason,” he wrote: “In a football match, everything is complicated by the presence of the other team.” Indeed. And then there’s that other great existentialist, Albert Camus, a goalkeeper in his youth, who wrote: “All that I know of morality I learnt from football.”

In one of the book’s essays, “Robert Northcott discusses Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety in relation to penalty shots.” American baseball fans likely will appreciate Jonathan Crowe’s essay, in which he observes that “the referee who errs badly is within the rules of the game, because the rules of the game allow him to err badly.”

The difference is that baseball fans can forgive such errors; the “football fan is so passionately committed to the game ... that he never forgives or forgets (and the lonely referee never explains). Or, as the great philosopher Yogi Berra once put it: “Think! How the hell are you gonna think and hit at the same time?”

The Invisible Gorilla

Everyday illusions “cause us to place undeserved trust in our instincts and intuition,” writes David A. Shaywitz in a *Wall Street Journal* review of *The Invisible Gorilla*, by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons (6/11/10).

Ten years ago, the authors ran an experiment in which Harvard students were asked to watch a minute-long film of basketball players passing a ball and count the number of passes. For about nine seconds in the middle of the film, a man in a gorilla suit walks through the players, pounds his chest, and moves on.

Half of the viewers were so busy counting passes that they didn’t notice the gorilla. Christopher and Daniel have all kinds of studies and statistics

demonstrating that this type of illusion is one of many to which we fall prey in our daily lives.

These include the *illusion of memory*, in which our vivid recollections are actually “based only loosely on reality.” The *illusion of knowledge* is that “we know less than we think—and the *illusion of cause*, where we mistake correlation for causation.”

The mother of all illusions might be the *illusion of confidence*, which is that “we profoundly underestimate our capacity to be fooled.”

We also tend to overestimate the confidence of others. When someone speaks with confidence, we tend to trust them, but confidence is just a trait “that “has relatively little to do with one’s underlying knowledge or mental ability.”

The Great Oom

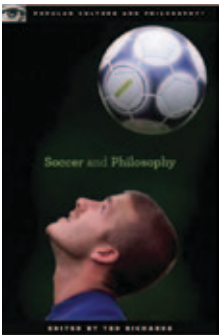
“Pierre Bernard was an example of a fascinating American type: the spiritual entrepreneur,” writes Christine Rosen in a *Wall Street Journal* review of *The Great Oom*, by Robert Love (4/23/10).

Pierre—who was “born Perry Baker in Leon, Iowa in 1876”—was “one of yoga’s earliest promoters ... whose talent for self-invention rivaled that of P.T. Barnum.” Pierre happened to learn yoga from an Indian tutor in 1889 and made a name for himself as a hypnotist.

He reportedly once put himself in a trance and then had pins pushed through his cheeks and earlobes, and a hatpin rammed through his tongue. Such spectacles helped make him “a sought-after guru to wealthy San Francisco residents,” and earned him rock-star status among his young female disciples.

Pierre managed to attract the Vanderbilt family, who bankrolled him as “he established a yoga center on an old Nyack estate.” This thrived for a time, and then Pierre’s enterprise, along with his Vanderbilt connection, fell apart during the Depression.

But by the time he died in 1955, yoga was moving mainstream, and Pierre’s “life reminds us that the appeal of spiritual cures that promise practical results is not a new phenomenon; it is an enduring part of our country’s history.”



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