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Sportswashing: Complicity and Corruption

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ABSTRACT

When the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup was awarded to Qatar, it raised a number of moral concerns, perhaps the most prominent of which was Qatar's woeful record on human rights in the arena of migrant labour. Qatar's interest in hosting the event is aptly characterised as a case of 'sportswashing'. The first aim of this paper is to provide an account of the nature of sportswashing, as a practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club (such as Newcastle United, owned by Saudi Arabia), to subvert the way that others attend to a moral violation for which the sportswashing agent is responsible. This may be done through distracting away from wrongdoing, minimising it, or normalising it. Second, we offer an account of the distinctive wrongs of sportswashing. The gravest moral wrong is the background injustice which sportswashing threatens to perpetuate. But the distinctive wrongs of sportswashing are twofold: first, it makes participants in sport (athletes, coaches, journalists, fans) complicit in the sportswasher's wrongdoing, which extends a moral challenge to millions of people involved with sport. Second, sportswashing corrupts valuable heritage associated with sporting traditions and institutions. Finally, we examine how sportswashing ought to be resisted. The appropriate forms of resistance will depend upon different roles people fill, such as athlete, coach, journalist, fan. The basic dichotomy of resistance strategies is to either exit the condition of complicity, for example by refusing to participate in the sporting event, or to modify one's engagement with the goal of transformation in mind. We recognize this is difficult and potentially burdensome: sports are an important part of many of our lives; our approach attempts to respect this.

KEYWORDS

Sportswashing; complicity; corruption; injustice; resistance

1. Introduction

When the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup was awarded to Qatar, it raised a number of moral concerns, perhaps the most prominent of which was Qatar's woeful record on human rights in the arena of migrant labour. Qatar's interest in hosting the event has been aptly characterised as a case of 'sportswashing': Ford and McKinnon (2021) characterise the blemishes Qatar may hope to obscure as including labour conditions as well as women's and LGBTQ rights. Worden (2022) notes that the World Cup commands an audience of

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3 billion viewers, in whose eyes Qatar is eager to appear as something other than a human rights violator. And Zidan (2022) notes that Qatar's World Cup will cap off what might be seen as a banner year for sportswashing.

The accusation of sportswashing has become more common in recent times as global sports have become increasingly entangled in political and economic orders that include seriously morally problematic elements. The first aim of this paper is to provide an account of the nature of sportswashing, as a practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club (such as Paris Saint-Germain, owned by a subsidiary of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund), to improve a tarnished moral reputation acquired through being a perpetrator of injustice. This may be done through distracting away from a moral violation, minimising it, or normalising it (cf. Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018; Kobierecki and Strożek 2021).

The second aim of this paper is to articulate the distinctive wrong of sportswashing. The gravest moral wrong in the vicinity is usually the background injustice which sportswashing threatens to perpetuate. But sportswashing also involves two *distinctive* wrongs. For one, it exploits valuable sporting elements—like the enthusiasm for sporting events and the communal identities built on sports fandom—to accomplish its aims. It thus takes something that is important to many people across the world, such as the World Cup, and pollutes it with problematic politics and severe injustice. Second, sportswashing also functions to make participants in sport (athletes, coaches, journalists, fans) complicit in the sportswasher's wrongdoing. Given that the 2022 World Cup will be hosted in stadiums built by migrant labourers, many of whom have died while working to prepare for the event,[1] the decision for Qatar to host seems to make football players, coaches, journalists and fans from across the world potentially complicit in this injustice. This extends a moral challenge to millions of people involved with sport, as they are involved in upholding and reinforcing structural injustice in ways that may be difficult for them to identify.

We follow Knowles (2021) in claiming that those made complicit in injustice by sportswashing ought to be open to ways they may be able to resist, rather than accepting the inevitability of injustice. And even for those for whom complicity is not especially at issue, there are reasons to seek ways of curbing the incidence and efficacy of sportswashing. We therefore conclude with the third aim of the paper, to examine how sportswashing ought to be resisted—whilst paying heed to the fact that the clubs or competitions used to sportswash are often valued parts of people's lives whether they are fans, athletes, or journalists, and cannot just be abandoned without serious loss. While our aim is not to assemble a hands-on instruction manual for resistance here, we explore two broad strategies for resistance which each carry their own risks and advantages.

2. What is Sportswashing, How Does It Work?

The term 'sportswashing' is descended from 'whitewashing', which itself is a metaphor involving lime or paint that is used to turn a surface white. 'Whitewashing' denotes a general practice of casting something or someone in a favourable light despite the presence of some dubious features, marks against them that are glossed over in the whitewash. While whitewashing occurs in many different contexts, it is especially of concern in the history of racism (cf. Brown et al. 2003). An older cousin of 'sportswashing' is 'greenwashing', the practice of corporations exaggerating or fabricating their

environmental virtues or the environmental qualities of their products in order to capitalise on pro-environment sentiment in consumers (cf. Chen and Chang 2013). In both whitewashing and greenwashing, the fundamental dynamic at play, also exhibited in sportswashing, is between a knowable moral violation, on the one hand, and the desire for that moral violation to receive less attention either than it has been receiving, than it might receive, or than it deserves to receive. In the case of sportswashing, the way attention is routed away from the moral violation is through sport. Because sport engages the passions of so many people and because sport commands a huge amount of attention, it has become a valuable strategic vehicle for navigating the fundamental dynamic between a moral violation and the desire for that violation not to be attended to by others.

The way that sportswashing seeks to address a moral violation essentially involves an audience, and it is therefore common to conceive of sportswashing as concerning primarily reputational effects, an exercise in re-branding to shed an undesirable association. The moral violation is, after all, something the sportswasher conceives of as problematic primarily because of the way it is known to others and condemned by them—it is a moral stain in need of washing. The fundamental dynamic of sportswashing lends itself to strategic use—we should expect that accusations of sportswashing typically cast the sportswasher as calculating in this respect. This is an important element in the complicity problems sportswashing generates because an accusation of sportswashing typically posits an agent engaged in wrongdoing and who seeks to address that wrongdoing, not by enacting reforms to curtail injustice, but by managing how it is seen by others—and in doing so, implicating those others in this wrongdoing.

While the term itself is relatively new, 'sportswashing' captures a phenomenon that arguably extends back at least as far as the 1934 World Cup, hosted by Mussolini's fascist Italy, and the 1936 Olympics, hosted by Hitler's Nazi Germany, and runs through intervening years in cases such as the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, just two years after a military coup installed a brutal dictatorship there.[2] Important to note in this thread is the power of sport to reach a large audience, a power that was amplified in the 20th century by the introduction of broadcast television, ever greater interest in sport, and globalisation more generally. As sport has become more resonant with more people across the globe, and as it is beamed into every corner that satellites can reach, its potential usefulness for fixing an image problem in the popular imagination has exploded. In this section, we first explore the mechanisms through which sportswashing works, before giving an account of paradigmatic features of sportswashing as well as tracking some departures from the paradigm.

How Sportswashing Works

Sportswashing may accomplish its goal through different effects. The most straightforward effect might be that owning a prominent club or hosting a mega-event like the World Cup enables 'state leaders to cut through the noise of global information society to disseminate a series of widely heard, reputation-enhancing messages over a sustained period' (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, 1146). This can be as simple as usurping undesirable internet search results through sheer volume and relevance. If the first page of search results for 'Qatar' all pertain to the World Cup, fewer people will make it

to later pages where results pertaining to human rights violations appear. We can describe this as *distracting* away from the moral violation that sportswashing addresses. The effect here is that fewer people end up attending to the moral violation that is being sportswashed, and more people are exposed to a positive association between a sporting event that interests them and the sportswashing agent.

A similar yet distinct effect is that of *minimising* the moral violation, for example by relegating it to a position of relatively less prominence than the mega sports event. Rather than causing fewer people to be aware of or attend to the moral violation, minimising changes the informational context in which the violation comes to people's attention such that it seems less urgent, extensive, or important than it is.

More worryingly perhaps, sportswashing could have the effect of *normalising* the moral violation. The effect here is not on how many people attend to the moral violation or how they gauge its significance, but instead on whether certain audiences see the moral violation as a violation at all. We identify two different pathways to this effect.

First, sporting clubs and events are associated with a powerful array of positive emotions and identity-forming commitments in numerous fans. When these are aligned with the owner of a beloved club, or the host of a cherished event, sportswashing could enact what we might think of as the halo effect writ large.[3] The positive association manufactured by the sportswasher may be so strong that it biases fans as they form their own conclusions about the moral violation in question. As Archer and Matheson (2021, 21) have argued, when people are publicly honoured, celebrated, and admired for a particular quality, this admiration can easily lead people to see other aspects of the person in a positive light as well. For example, celebrating someone who has created great works of art but who has also performed serious acts of immorality may lead people to view those immoral acts in a more favourable light (Archer and Matheson 2019).[4] The same goes for sports clubs, organisations and competitions. When people celebrate a team's success this can cast a positive light on those associated with the club, including the owners and sponsors.

Second, as we will elaborate in §3, sports and sporting events are often a way of creating and defining a certain kind of community.[5] Sportswashing will most often function not simply by targeting particular individuals in order to intervene in how some individual person attends to a moral violation in isolation. Instead, the fact that sports are an arena in which people readily engage with one another, form communities, express shared loyalties, and mutually reinforce shared emotions makes it more possible for sportswashing to propagate its effect. One dimension of this is a kind of community infiltration—by becoming engaged in sport the sportswasher can hope to acquire acceptance and status as a (prominent, beneficent) member of a given sporting community. As such, they can also hope to benefit from what we might call an induced tribalism, whereby they would be variously defended, excused, and justified by a sporting community as one of their own, especially against the criticisms of perceived outsiders. Ardent followers of teams will know the experience of defending the conduct of one of their players, or the behaviour of their manager, even when an impartial point of view speaks plainly against them. This phenomenon has recently been in evidence, for example, when Chelsea Football Club supporters chanted the name of their Russian oligarch owner during a moment of applause in support of Ukraine (Descalsota 2022), an example we return to below.

Paradigm Cases and Departures from the Paradigm

Consider Qatar's recent engagements in world football, which seem a strong candidate for a paradigm case of sportswashing. There is a serious injustice—human rights abuses in the conditions of migrant labour[6] – that is knowable and creates reputational damage. The moral violation isn't trivial, but instead concerns justice violations on a large scale. The moral violation could come to dominate the rest of the world's perception of Qatar, because it is a small state that doesn't regularly feature in headlines around the world. Through its ownership of Paris Saint-Germain (acquired by Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, through Qatar Sports Investments in 2011), Qatar has created a different kind of headline: PSG has dominated French football in the recent period, and has made some of the highest-profile signings of players in history. Qatar's successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup can be viewed in the same light: by hosting, Qatar can be relatively assured of enjoying a close association with a wildly popular event that will displace other kinds of information about Qatar for a worldwide audience. We can see that it is plausible, then, that Qatar's engagement in world football will have the effect of distracting from the radical inequalities that characterise Qatari society by relegating pertinent information to the background. The fact that Qatar is so prominently involved in such beloved sporting events and institutions may well minimise the moral violations inherent in that inequality in the eyes of an exceptionally wide audience. And finally, as Qatar succeeds in becoming an increasingly prominent member of the global football community, it may reasonably hope to be seen as nothing other than a sovereign state whose domestic affairs include some foibles but are nonetheless beyond the reproach of outsiders.

The case of Qatar exhibits several features that we would expect to find across many cases of sportswashing. Paradigm cases of sportswashing, we posit, are ones in which:

(1) the moral violation is serious and widespread rather than trivial and isolated
(2) the agent in question is a state or regime
(3) sports are deliberately, strategically used, through hosting events and owning clubs, to mitigate the undesirable reputational effects of the moral violation

Departures from the paradigm case are possible along all three of the listed dimensions. First, the moral violation to be addressed by sportswashing could fall anywhere on a spectrum between relatively isolated, trivial offences and widespread, outright atrocities. The true severity and scale of the moral violation, of course, we should expect to be contested in accusations and responses to accusations of sportswashing. But we think it is clear that sportswashing is distinct from the banality of a moderately bad person attempting to use, say, owning a sports team to hide their flaws and boost their ego. Paradigmatic cases will tend to be toward the serious end of the spectrum, and more widespread.

Second, the agent accused of sportswashing could possibly be something other than a state, and could stand in different relations to a state, or perhaps in no particular relation to any state at all. The clearest non-state candidate for sportswashing is corporations, which may be accused of sportswashing, for example, by purchasing naming rights to stadiums in an effort to distract, minimise, or normalise their engagement in problematic practices. Corporations, we are all too aware, are perfectly capable of gross and serious

moral violations, and could often attempt, just like states, to address those violations through engagement in sport. So while we think in paradigmatic cases of sportswashing the agent in question will be a state that has official responsibilities tied to human rights and thus in some ways uniquely position it to be a violator of those rights, it seems corporations may also rightly be accused of sportswashing.

There seems something odd about the possibility of an individual engaging in sportswashing, yet sports franchise owners with dubious moral records who enjoy reputational enhancement because of their role in a sports team are far from alien. We have already mentioned former Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, for example. Still, the case of Abramovich is complex: what there is about him and his career and wealth that he might seek to distract from, minimise or normalise is entangled in relations to massive corporations and the Russian state. We suspect that it would generally be the case that individuals *qua* individuals don't engage in sportswashing, since the kind of reputational worry that sportswashing addresses will very often require some kind of association with a larger, collective entity, such as a corporation or state.[7]

Third, beyond engaging in sportswashing through owning a club or hosting an event, perhaps other modes of interacting with sport are possible means of sportswashing. We have already mentioned naming rights of venues. Possibly a sport itself, rather than a team or event, could be used, as might be the case when an abusive regime builds out expansive sports infrastructure for popular use. Other kinds of advertising may also constitute sportswashing. Gazprom, the Russian, majority state-owned, energy giant, has been until quite recently a major sponsor of UEFA events. Yet Gazprom's sponsorship was not an ordinary kind of advertising, since Gazprom offers nothing to ordinary consumers. Its goals may well be better characterised in terms of sportswashing than in terms of the variety of economic gain that would ordinarily capture the value and point of advertising.

It is also worth noting that the element of strategic thinking involved in sportswashing can be complicated. First, it is true that this element of an allegation of sportswashing will often be hard to assess as a third party. But of course we're not unaccustomed to this challenge, as many judgments in moral life require inferences about things like intentions and states of mind. And then again, often it won't be so hard to make plausible inferences of the kind required here. Second, deliberate, strategic use of sport may not always run all the way from conception of the possibility through to the execution of sportswashing. The 1978 World Cup in Argentina was awarded in 1966, and the military dictatorship only took control in 1976. As Jonathan Wilson puts it, hosting the tournament 'presented the junta with a huge problem. A tournament afflicted by bomb attacks and kidnappings was unthinkable; the World Cup had to be used to show that the coup had brought stability, that Argentina was safe' (Wilson 2016, 192). The dictatorship clearly did not *initiate* the hosting of the event. Nonetheless, they took it as an *opportunity* to sportswash. Merely attempting to demonstrate that your country is a safe place to visit is not, by itself, sportswashing. What makes the 1978 World Cup a plausible case of sportswashing is the fact that the dictatorship was engaged in brutal, egregious practices of squashing dissent, including, famously, by disappearing dissidents. The dictatorship sensed that if Argentina won the World cup, it could 'create a sense of national euphoria and togetherness' (Wilson 2016, 194) – just what you need when you are brutally attempting to stamp out dissent.

The fact that the dictatorship was faced with hosting the World Cup, rather than intending to host it in order to sportswash, is a peculiar inflection in how strategic the use of sport was, but it does not undermine the claim that this was sportswashing.

Further variation in sportswashing is also possible. The features that constitute sportswashing, as we have described them, do not also constitute success conditions. So sportswashing might come in both successful and unsuccessful varieties. Whether Qatar's World Cup ends up being successful or not as an exercise in sportswashing seems to us to still be in the balance at the time of writing.

Sportswashing is not a catch-all category for morally problematic engagement in sport. There are, sadly, myriad other ways that our sports, teams, and events can be morally compromised. Departures from the paradigm should therefore be accepted as cases of sportswashing with some caution. Equally, sportswashing is not equivalent to so-called sports diplomacy, or assimilable to the broader category of soft power. Sportswashing is not simply image-building, but is instead a way of addressing a specific moral problem that is causing reputational damage. So while all states may cultivate soft power through sport, and while many states use sport to build their image, only some states are rightly accused of sportswashing—those whose engagement in sport is designed to distract away from, minimise, or normalise an injustice for which they are responsible and which, because it is visible to others, presents a reputational problem to be solved.

3. What is Wrong with Sportswashing?

If the aim of sportswashing is to blot out serious injustices, then the obvious moral problem in the vicinity of sportswashing is these very injustices: the human rights abuses in Qatar, or the death and destruction doled out by the Argentinian dictatorship. However, these injustices take place regardless of whether they are accompanied by sportswashing. The wrongs we will focus on are the wrongs of sportswashing, not the wrongs that by sportswashing a regime seeks to erase or perpetuate. We focus on the wrong of distracting from, minimising, or normalising moral violations via sports. What is wrong with this? For one, sportswashing corrupts valuable sporting elements to achieve its aims.[8] But it also makes participants complicit in wrongdoing. These are not entirely distinct: as we will argue below, fans becoming complicit in an owner's wrongdoing (for instance) *just is* one way in which sporting communities or institutions can be corrupted. But we think it helps to illuminate the wrongdoing of sportswashing by focusing on *complicity* and *corruption* separately.

Complicity

It is obvious that ordinary fans and athletes are not complicit in a sportswashing regime's wrongdoing in any direct way. Ordinary fans do not execute people for being gay, and they are frequently not part of a political system in such a way as to be responsible for voting for vicious human rights abusers. Yet sportswashing might make ordinary fans and athletes complicit in, say, the human rights abuses in Qatar. That is because if there is international pressure on a regime to cease violating human rights, and if sportswashing

takes attention away from these human rights violations, sportswashing risks perpetuating these injustices. So, participants in sports can become complicit in these injustices by aiding sportswashing which allows these injustices to continue.

For example, Newcastle manager Eddie Howe was asked—after Saudi Arabia, in a move condemned by human rights organisations, executed 81 people—whether he would comment on the executions (Tolmich 2022). Howe declined the opportunity, saying that he would only comment on the football—even though Saudi Arabia owns Newcastle. Eddie Howe is far from alone in this, many managers and athletes associated with sportswashed clubs decline to speak out against their owners' misdeeds.

But we can see the problem: this helps to separate the owners' misdeeds from the club. Owners are thus empowered to enjoy association with the club in a positive light, whilst the club is simultaneously distanced from the misdeeds of the owners (but not from the owners) when the misdeeds are brought up.[9] Thus the owner's reputation is bolstered, minimising or distracting from their misdeeds. The manager (or player) plays a role in the sportswashing and—given that sportswashing can perpetuate the initial injustice that is meant to be laundered—becomes complicit in that injustice.

Fans, too, become complicit. To take a recent example we have mentioned already, Chelsea fans sang their (former, then locked-out by government sanctions) owner's name during a moment of applause in support of Ukraine, during Russia's invasion. Roman Abramovich is deeply tied to Vladimir Putin, and in the context of cultural sanctions one could see the Chelsea fans' behaviour as undermining—admittedly to a small extent—efforts to place pressure on the Russian regime. (It is worth adding that by normalising wrongdoing sportswashing seems to morally corrupt the fans, too: it misleads fans into approving of something that they should abhor.)

Even, for instance, Newcastle fans who are harsh critics of Saudi Arabia are still rendered complicit. For one, although sportswashers invest a lot of money, they make some back, too. Fans don't watch for free: they go to the stadium or watch on the television. Through ticket prices and television rights (or through merchandise sales), the sportswasher makes back some money, the fans' money. This money helps perpetuate the sportswashing. Secondly, fans play an important role in shaping the identity of a club (Tarver 2017, 2; Wojtowicz 2021), or in making a competition worthwhile (the World Cup is important at least partly because fans care about it). There's little use in trying to launder your reputation by being associated with a widely-hated club or a terrible competition (unless you undertake a major reform project). The identity of, and value of, the club or competition are used to sportswash: sportswashers know that people care about, say, Newcastle United, and Newcastle's stadium, St James' Park, has an atmosphere that the fans create—it is association with these impressive things that makes sportswashing feasible. That makes all match-going fans complicit as long as they celebrate their team's goals and do the things associated with fandom.

It is also vital to note that by making people complicit, sportswashing wrongs these participants in sports. Fans, players, and coaches do wrong through being complicit, but the fact that sportswashing intends to make them complicit makes clear that sportswashing also wrongs these people.

Corruption

The second wrong of sportswashing is that it *corrupts* the values embedded in sporting culture. As Andrew Edgar (2021) points out, soccer clubs—and we can extend this to other sports and add to this competitions like the World Cup, the Tour de France, the Olympics, or myriad other institutions—have 'long and proud histories', they can be 'the focal points of a community', a 'source of communal identity'. For instance, Newcastle United are historically one of England's most successful teams, and although they have not won a major competition in decades, they attract a fanatical local following. These long and proud histories, these communal ties, are deeply important to many who participate in them—Edgar goes as far as comparing them to sacred things.

Edgar's point is to highlight the problem when these clubs or institutions are rendered wholly into commercial entities. We can see a similar kind of problem in sportswashing; something with a deep sporting, or social, value is corrupted into something that is a mere tool to launder a tainted reputation. When you spill a cup of coffee, it might be fine to soak it up with the pages of an old, unloved book—but if you were to do so with the pages of the Book of Kells, you'd clearly fail to appreciate the value of the Book of Kells. Sportswashers do something similar; they putrefy what they use. They take an important cultural object and *use* it for their own purposes, cognizant of the fact that it is an important cultural artefact only insofar as this enables them to sportswash.

Fans of a team follow the club for years, sometimes across generations. Nobody would claim that the *only* thing fans care about is winning, since they also want their team to play in a certain way, to have specific community relations and events, and to sign the right athletes who fit in with the club's ethos. Yet victory is an immensely powerful draw for fans, and the desire to be owned by a local lad who has attended every game for the past thirty years quickly goes out the window when the possibility of massive investment and the chance of regularly challenging for titles comes around. Since the club is so important to these fans, it is no surprise they want it to do well. It is this that the sportswasher often exploits, at least when it comes to club ownership. After all, when the club does well, the sportswasher will be well-regarded—the fans will defend the sportswasher, just as they defend a beloved manager or player.

There are two moral problems here. First, sportswashing might make fans forget about the importance of sporting and communal values other than victory. This can flatten what it means to be a fan, replacing the rich communal identities and relations with a cheap drive for victory. This problem is not specific to sportswashing, it is a general problem with too much money in sports—it is Edgar's concern about commercialization. Not all money flooding into sport is used to blot out an injustice. It is important to distinguish general problems associated with the commercialization of sport from the criticisms we are offering in this paper.

The second problem concerns *why* sportswashing dries out these rich social relations. It does so in order to cover the moral evils in which a regime engages. And it does so *through* the fans. Think, again, of the Chelsea fans chanting Abramovich's name. Complicity gives us a way to understand what it means when sportswashing corrupts something valuable: institutions, managers, players, and fans are turned from participants in the sports world into those complicit with political misdeeds. Complicity corrupts sporting heritage.

Similarly, fans who watch for the love of the game—not for support of any particular team that is being sportswashed—might have what they love corrupted by the fact that they can no longer simply enjoy the spectacle of football at, say, the World Cup. Instead they must watch against a blood-soaked background. Even if they can avoid lauding Qatar, even if they can recognise the evil of human rights abuses and that hosting the World Cup does not erase this, these fans can no longer enjoy the simple pleasure of watching perhaps the world's greatest sporting event; instead they watch a morally warped competition. The competition is corrupted and the fan's enjoyment of something special is corrupted. And while we have so far been focusing on the *cultural* values associated with sports, we can see here that the more paradigmatically *sporting* values —effort, fairness, sheer skill—might be corrupted, too. These are all still impressive, but they are corrupted insofar as they are now put to work to launder dirty reputations. The sportswasher takes something sacred and renders it profane.

One final example summarises our point in this section. Take the case of Chris Helliwell, a Newcastle fan who wrote into the *Guardian football weekly podcast* (Rushden 2022). He described himself as a 'recovering Newcastle fan' who despite his concerns with the Saudi owners was unable to stop following the team. His father was a huge fan of the team and after his father's death Chris's mother took over his father's fandom as a form of memorialising her husband. Chris describes how as his mother was on her deathbed, he was giving her score updates on a match between Newcastle and Wolves. Her final smile before she died was a response to the news that Newcastle had scored. This case shows the deep historical and emotional ties that people have to the teams they support. These bonds not only tie fans to the club but in many cases to their family and friends, including those who are no longer around. For many fans, these clubs represent an important and irreplaceable form of heritage that ties them to places and people that they love.[10] We have argued that sportswashing corrupts these values.

Summary

It is worth thinking about how, in corrupting the sporting institutions that so many of us love, sportswashers *objectify* these institutions, as well as the athletes and fans involved (see Nussbaum 1995). We offer this not as a separate notion of wrongdoing, but as a way of further elucidating both corruption and complicity. Not out of a desire to win, nor even out of the purely egotistical desire to be adored—the sportswasher uses the fans' support for the club for nefarious ends: to blot out their own wrongdoing. The sportswasher uses something of important cultural value in a way that does not respect that value. That is *corruption*.

Further, fans and players are used to sportswash. Consider what Phil Mickelson had to say of Saudi Arabia and their breakaway golf tour:

> They are scary motherfuckers to get involved with … We know they killed Khashoggi and have a horrible record. They execute people over there for being gay. Knowing all of this, why would I even consider it? Because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape how the PGA Tour operates (Murray 2022).

Mickelson might have wanted to use the Saudi tour to serve his own aims, but he failed to take the next intellectual step: Saudi Arabia would be using *him* to launder its own reputation. The sportswasher relies on fans growing to love the owner, or valorising the nation that has hosted a successful tournament like the World Cup, and so the sportswasher gets seen in a positive light—sometimes because of what a coach, player, or journalist might say—despite the injustices they commit. That is *complicity*.

The sportswasher makes the fan into a vehicle for immoral ends, a vehicle who will often lose their moral bearings in becoming complicit. Sportswashing is so insidious because it can corrupt a club by making fans and athletes complicit in wrongdoing. Thus they become complicit not just in wrongdoing, but in the misuse and disrespect of the thing that they love.

4. How Ought Sportswashing Be Resisted?

We have discussed what sportswashing is and why it is wrong. But what does this tell us about how those involved in sport ought to respond to sportswashing?

Many involved in sport may feel that sportswashing does not make them complicit in wrongdoing. Fans and players of Newcastle United or Chelsea, for example, might point out that they had no say in who would take over the ownership of their club and are not the ones who determine who is deemed to pass the English Premier League's 'fit-and-proper-person test' for becoming a director or owner of a football club.

However, by looking at the literature on moral responsibility for complicity we can see that things are more complicated than this. As Charlotte Knowles (2021, 231) argues, people may find themselves complicit in wrongdoing through no fault of their own, and they can either respond in ways that solidify this complicity or in ways that resist it.[11] Knowles gives the example of a white man born into a white supremacist society who finds himself benefitting from his skin colour in a way that makes him complicit in his society's racism. It is not this man's fault that he was born into such a society. Having found himself in this situation though, he can either choose to accept the racism in society and the privileges it affords him or to resist racism and seek to reduce the extent to which he is complicit. As this case shows, while people may find themselves complicit in wrongdoing through no fault of their own, they are nevertheless responsible for whether or not they respond to their complicity by accepting what it confers on them or resisting it (Knowles 2021, 232). In the case of sportswashing, then, those involved in sport may not be responsible for finding themselves complicit due to sportswashing but they are responsible for how they respond to this complicity.

In the case of sportswashing, there appear to be two broad strategies available for resistance. First, one can stop participating in the practice that is being used by the sportswasher (the club, sport, or competition). Second, one can transform the way that one participates in the practice that is being used by the sportswasher in order to combat the aims of the sportswashing. We address each of these broad strategies by turn.

Ending Participation

Fans can boycott their team or a particular competition, players can refuse to play for certain teams or in certain competitions, and journalists can refuse to cover teams or competitions being used for sportswashing. These are all ways of ending participation in a sporting practice that might be hoped to defuse complicity and dent the efficacy of sportswashing, especially when participation is curtailed as part of an organised, collective effort.

What might this resistance strategy look like in practical terms? Here it is useful to consider a recent sporting example of resistance against injustice. In a spectacularly badly judged move, Raith Rovers, a football club who play in the Scottish Championship, decided to sign striker David Goodwillie, who in 2017 was found by a civil court to have raped a woman in 2011 and he and his co-defendent were ordered to pay £100,000 in damages to the woman they had assaulted (see Brooks 2022; The Courier 2022).[12] The response of many Raith Rovers supporters, staff members and volunteers provides a clear example of how those involved in sport can use their different roles to resist injustice. The morning after Goodwillie's signing, the club's main sponsor, crime writer Val McDermid, announced that she was ending her support of the club and cancelling her sponsorship deal. Shortly after, captain Tyler Rattray and several other members of the Raith women's team, announced that they would no longer play for the club. This was accompanied by a swathe of resignations throughout the club as directors, supporter liaison officers, stadium announcers and club television commentators all joined the chorus of those distancing themselves from the club in the wake of the signing. Hundreds of Raith fans took to social media to announce that they would be ending their support for the club, or at least putting it on hold until Goodwillie was gone. Scottish politicians put further pressure on the club with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown also criticised the club for the signing. These protests were eventually effective, as three days after Goodwillie's signing Raith Rovers announced that Goodwillie would not play for the club and entered into negotiations to end his contract (Rovers 2021). While the signing of Goodwillie is not obviously a case of sportswashing, the resistance to this signing highlights the ways in which those involved in sport can engage in resistance against injustice effectively by ending their participation.

In thinking through this form of resistance it is important to consider what one's social role is in relation to the injustice at issue. According to Robin Zheng (2018), when thinking about cases of structural injustice it is important to look at how the social role that an individual occupies both contributes to and constitutes that injustice. These same roles, though, can also be used to challenge injustice. For example, a white man living in a racist society may be able to use his position as a teacher to promote anti-racism in the classroom. As a neighbour he may be able to play a role in welcoming new non-white residents to the neighbourhood and supporting them if they face hostility from other residents. In the case of sportswashing, those involved in sports should consider what social roles they occupy and how they might utilise these roles to try to combat sportswashing. Whether one is a club director, player, manager, coach, hardcore supporter, casual fan, journalist or office manager will affect what one can do in order to resist sportswashing.

In the case of the Goodwillie example we can see that those protesting the signing used their different social roles to put pressure on the club. Sponsors withdrew their funding from the club. The players for the women's team refused to play for their team. Those who work for the club resigned from their jobs. Supporters can announce that they will refuse to support the team until a change is made. Despite the admirable behaviour of Raith Rovers fans, this is a disappointingly rare response to sportswashing, but sometimes does happen. For instance, Newcastle fan Daniel Rey wrote in the soccer journal *The Blizzard* that, due to the Saudi purchase, he would renounce his fandom (Rey 2021). His replica shirts would go away, he would no longer watch or check the score. Similarly, the Norwegian men's football team discussed boycotting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, though in the end decided not to do so, as they decided that dialogue and pressure would be a more effective route towards bringing about greater respect for human rights in Qatar (Waagaard 2021).[13] When this resistance is successful, it will not only prevent an individual fan's complicity, but it might also help to preserve a valuable piece of sporting heritage: the club resists corruption if those who constitute it refuse to participate.

This form of resistance carries a heavy price tag, however. At the individual level, fans would be giving up something very valuable to them, in some ways a part of themselves (Tarver 2017).[14] It is also worth emphasising that athletes, managers and others have a huge amount at stake. Athletes and coaches have their entire careers at stake. They train for many years, spending time and money aiming to reach the pinnacle of the sport. By staying with, or moving to, a club that has had a huge injection of cash, they have a chance to succeed in what they have dedicated their lives to achieving. The point here is that there are so many things that fans or athletes care about that can lure them in, to stay with their club or play in a competition, and the sportswashers can use this to keep the fans or athletes on board. It isn't just that there are valuable sporting elements that are exploited, the people who are *sportswashed* are deeply—and rightfully so—attached to these values. At the collective level, preserving a valuable piece of sporting heritage through the strategy of ending participation may look less like preservation and more like abandonment. This is to say that this resistance strategy is both pragmatically difficult and morally hard to justify. Still, as the example above illustrates, it will often deserve consideration.

Transforming Participation

A second resistance strategy is for those involved in sport not to withdraw, but to transform the nature of their participation. For example, in the 1968 Olympic games, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two Black American athletes, finished 1st and 3rd respectively in the 200-metre sprint (see Tower 2018; Trueman 2015). Both athletes decided to stage a protest when on the podium. Smith and Carlos stood on the podium without shoes and wearing black socks to represent Black poverty. They both wore a black glove on one hand and raised it in a fist to represent Black power and Black unity. Together with 2nd place finisher Peter Norman, all three medal winners wore Olympic Project for Human Rights badges. This organisation had called on Black athletes to boycott the 1968 Olympics in protest against racial segregation in the United States and elsewhere, and racism in sport. However, this presented a difficult choice for Black athletes who supported the organisation. If they chose to boycott the games they would

be giving up their ambition of sporting success that they had worked so hard to achieve. Smith and Carlos decided that they would not boycott the games but would instead find a way to participate while still taking a stand against injustice. By making this protest, Smith and Carlos transformed the way they were participating, in order to take a stand against racism and combat the use of sport to distract away from human rights abuses. Smith and Carlos used their social roles as athletes and the attention this brought them to raise awareness of human rights abuses. They did so not by boycotting the Olympic Games but by transforming their participation in the games.

Even though this strategy may not immediately occasion the same costs as ending participation, it may nonetheless not be possible or may be very costly in some cases: Smith, Carlos, and even Norman all faced recriminations for their protests. Solidarity in enacting participation with protest might sometimes offer some protection against the risks involved, so there is reason to treat collective enactment of this strategy as the clearest kind of moral obligation it is possible to incur. If all players and coaches and other officials participating in the Qatar World Cup make a point of speaking repeatedly about labour abuses, the distraction effect may well backfire. If they make other collective gestures—moments of silence, patches on their kits, etc. – it may also be that minimisation and normalisation are less likely to occur. Undertaken collectively, the risks of reprisals from authorities, whether Qatari officials or FIFA, can be dampened. So perhaps the strongest moral reasons point toward an obligation for those participating in the World Cup to organise themselves to transform their participation to involve coordinated protest. The Norwegian team have already provided a clear example of how this might be done by wearing T-shirts with the slogan 'human rights—on and off the pitch' in a qualifying match against Gibraltar (Skysports.com 2021). Still, even in the absence or failure of such efforts, it's clear individuals also have opportunities to transform their participation. To systematically spurn those opportunities may well be a moral failing.

Even if people are not in a position to openly resist sportswashing there are still steps that should be taken to make sure not to entrench one's complicity in injustice. One important step those unable to resist publicly can take is to discuss the injustice privately with those they trust. Where even this step is too risky, Knowles (2021, 233) argues that another important step one can take is opening oneself up to the possibility of resistance by finding new ways of understanding one's situation. While it may not always be possible to resist oppression externally (in the world), we should at least attempt to resist it internally by making sure that we continue to recognise the injustice taking place.[15] In the case of sportswashing, this will mean, amongst other things, refusing to allow oneself to be seduced by the sportswasher's bargain. When a sportswasher has transformed a team from mediocrities into Champions League winners, it may be very tempting to start downplaying the significance of the injustice the sportswasher is engaging in. Here, internal resistance will be needed to ensure one continues to recognise the injustice.

In summary, those seeking to resist sportswashing can seek either to stop participating in the sports practice that is being used to sportswash, thereby curtailing their complicity, or to transform their participation in the practice in a way that combats the aims of sportswashing. Which option to choose will depend on the details of the case and on an individual's social roles. Where neither resistance strategy is available, individuals should make sure not to entrench their complicity in the injustice and to remain open to new opportunities for resistance as they arise.[16]

5. Conclusion

Sportswashing uses a precious piece of heritage for immoral purposes and thus debases it. It can also render participants in sports—such as fans and athletes—complicit. While the contextual details of any given instance of sportswashing will vary, we have suggested there are general strategies to resist sportswashing. This is not easy, because sports are so important to people and both strategies involve risks and burdens—so it is a mistake to uncritically condemn participants in sport who go along with sportswashing.

We have not focussed on one kind of group who have an important role to play in addressing sportswashing: sporting bodies that regulate leagues and allocate hosting rights. Bodies with these powers should try to make sure that clubs are not taken over by, or competitions hosted by, sportswashers. They should do this to *protect* the cultural heritage they help control. Effective policies of these kinds would spare other participants in sport from much of the moral brunt of sportswashing. Yet there are limits on what we may hope for in this vein, and not only because of the unending threat of material corruption of such sporting bodies. It is not possible to bring the set of moral violations eligible to be sportswashed into perfect alignment with explicit exclusion criteria for owning clubs or hosting events. As a result, understanding and resisting sportswashing is likely to remain a vital task of participating in sport into the distant future.[17]

Notes

1. The Guardian (2021) reports a figure of 6,500 deaths, but acknowledges complexity in this determination.
2. We make no effort to offer an exhaustive catalogue of either historical or contemporary cases of sportswashing—there are surely far more than we can hope to examine or even mention here. We hope this paper will contribute to ongoing discussions about sportswashing in various ways, including discussions of when an accusation of sportswashing is apt. A particular issue in this area is examining accusations of sportswashing as unduly leveraged by the developed world against the developing world.
3. See Thorndike (1920) for the original finding. See Haidt (2001, 820) and Kahneman (2011, 82, 199) for discussion.
4. An important issue that our discussion raises for future research is the relationship between the way in which sportswashing taints sports clubs and tournaments and the way in which an artist's immoral behaviour taints their work. While philosophers have investigated the way in which art can be corrupted by the immoral acts of the artist (Matthes 2021; Willard 2021) and the similar ethical issues that arise from being a sports fan (Archer 2021), there is a great deal more work to be done in detailing the similarities and differences between the two.
5. See Tarver (2017) and Archer (2021) for discussions of the relationship between sports fandom and community.
6. Since the country's residents are mostly migrant workers (Brannagan and Giulianotti [2018, 1142] put the figure at 88%), relations between wealthy Qatari citizens and large, desperately poor migrant populations are a prominent source of justice concerns. See Amnesty International (2022) for a general report.
7. Thanks to Federico Luzzi for some helpful questions here.
8. There might be wrongs that apply to all kinds of 'washing', for instance, if you seek to greenwash, wokewash, or sportswash, you fail to engage with the bad thing you are doing and seek to divert attention from it—a sort of insincerity pervades. But our focus will be on the particular wrongs related to sportswashing.

9. We will argue below that distancing the owners from the club—appreciating the sport whilst criticising the owners—might be a way of resisting sportswashing in some part. But that needs to be a wholesale distancing: managers are too often happy enough to praise owners for their investments whilst distancing the club from human rights abuses.
10. As a reviewer rightly points out, sports are corrupt in many ways: racism, sexism, and greed pervade. Yet this does not negate the immensely important sporting and communal values that are present, and to further corrupt sports by sportswashing is wrong. The pyramids, for example, were built by slaves. That does not mean it would be okay to open a casino in one.
11. Relatedly, Aragon and Jaggar (2018) argue that a more expansive notion of complicity is preferable: people may be complicit without having any desire to commit the relevant wrongdoing, yet their actions may allow this wrongdoing to continue.
12. An important question arising from this that we do not have the space to adequately address here is whether it is legitimate to continue to impose social sanctions once someone has been subject to legal sanctions. For discussions of this and related issues see Archer and Matheson (2021) and Radzick (2020).
13. In the end, they would not have been in a position to boycott the tournament as they did not qualify.
14. We note that for prospective new fans, attracted to sporting success and prominence within a sport, considerations of heritage and identity function differently, such that in general the reasons to not become a fan of a sportswashing club will be relatively stronger than reasons to give up being a fan of a sportswashing club.
15. The distinction between external and internal resistance comes from Hay (2011, 32).
16. It is worth noting the possibility that acts of resistance against sportswashing may themselves be motivated by a desire to enhance one's own moral reputation rather than by a genuine desire to combat sportswashing. Resistance motivated in this way may constitute a form of virtue signaling or moral grandstanding rather than a genuinely praiseworthy act. We thank an anonymous referee for this interesting suggestion, which we do not have the space to properly explore here.
17. Thanks to audiences at the 2022 British Philosophy of Sport Association Annual Conference and the Conference on Sport, Power and Politics: Challenges in a changing global structure at the University of Aveiro. Alfred Archer's work on this paper was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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