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The Pursuit of Virtue in Outdoor Sport and Recreation

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THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE IN OUTDOOR SPORT AND RECREATION

Jonathan Schnaufer

Abstract

This thesis presents for consideration six virtues that can be used to determine how adventure sports, outdoor recreation and expeditions can maintain their integrity when their methods are challenged by novel influences. Sports must adapt to social change, such as cultural, technological, or monetary influences. When they do so, mountaineering and adventure sports should be guided by ethical and aesthetic values that I argue can be maintained by adhering to the virtues of collaboration, education, athleticism, stewardship, sport empowerment and temperance. Some methods of pursuing these activities have alienated athletes from the natural component of outdoor sports and have moved toward aiming to control the environment rather than seeking to achieve human excellence in collaboration with nature. Further, using and accessing support and assistance strains the moral integrity of the activity and the unique value of accomplishments. In some cases, athletes have shifted their values toward prioritizing being first or completing an achievement by any means necessary. I examine how this has undermined the value of outdoor pursuits. The implication of a competitive ethos and the acceptance of high levels of assistance is that some past and modern achievements and expeditions have yielded unethical accomplishments that compromise the integrity of the sport.

I. Introduction

Adventure sports such as mountaineering, rock and ice climbing, backcountry skiing, ultra-running, whitewater kayaking, and polar exploration are at a peak of popularity. More and more feats are being accomplished, and athletes are being pushed towards new and higher expectations. Due to the growing popularity of these sports and society's eagerness to witness and share in outdoor athletes' adventurous achievements through film and social media, more amateur and "arm-chair athletes" are gaining recognition on an international stage. The rapid expansion of the outdoor community has created a rift in outdoor culture between the purists of old, who helped establish these sports, and the new incoming fleet of adventure athletes. As outdoor communities take notice of these new athletic feats, they are raising questions about whether modern advancements play an overall positive or negative role.

On the one hand, technological and communicative advancements close an accessibility gap; they make new achievements possible, and they allow people to be engaged in outdoor pursuits who would once have found them out of reach. Contemporary benefits in the form of clearer access and navigation, safety equipment, communication, and comfort have all gone through major improvements since the time of the first mountaineers and explorers. On the other hand, while these modern innovations allow more astonishing feats to be accomplished, one must ask if they are not also pushing outdoor athletes towards taming the experience of the wild. The outdoor community would never give the same credit for summitting a mountain to someone who takes a lift to the top of the mountain as they would a ski mountaineer, yet both achieve the same location, gaze on the same landscape, and enjoy the same descent.

Recent accomplishments in adventure sports illuminate a paradox between the endeavors of old and their current iterations. They raise questions about the future of preserving the sports' wildness. Do outdoor sports alter the participant's connection with the great outdoors? Is every innovation a step towards an anthropocentric shift in adventure sports? What are the means whereby support is used without affecting the integrity of the achievement?

I will argue that a line is crossed when technology plays too large of a role in athletic feats. I will also examine how that line must be appropriately adjusted to factor in new technological advancements without compromising the integrity of the sport or the authenticity of the athlete's achievements.

II. The Virtues of Outdoor Sport and Recreation

The origins of adventure sport and exploration originally connect with philosophy through the lenses of romanticism and a metaphysics of nature. In the 19th century, authors such as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and John Muir viewed society as increasingly separated from nature

while also drawing a sense of personal integrity from their experiences of the wild. Even Thoreau, who left the formal restrictions of society to live alone in a cabin on Walden Pond, argued for an integration between humans and nature. In these philosophers' contemplation of their place in nature, we can see both a segregation of society from nature and a fusing of human society with the natural world. Thoreau and Muir, in particular, saw the influence of industrial society as corrupting the individual, and they saw communion with nature as essential to developing the virtue of both the individual and society (Dorman 1998). Both Thoreau and Muir saw a potential for human collaboration with nature where wild areas can be freely experienced and their value can be understood by those who enter them. Such a view of the relationship between humans and nature has been described as "intimate familiarity" (Treanor 2010, 76) and as "gross contact" (Turner 1996, 26).

Thoreau uses similar language in describing his descent of Mt. Ktaadn in *The Maine Woods*,
I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me...What is this Titan that has possession of me. Talk of mysteries! – Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, -rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common* sense! *Contact! Contact!* (1864/2004, 69-71)

In feeling completely unfamiliar with the territory around him, Thoreau begins to question his own feelings of self and expresses a feeling of "other-ness" in his surroundings.

This dispossession, or detachment, resonates with several sentiments that are commonly expressed by people who participate in outdoor recreation. The first is a feeling of *alienation*. Those familiar with these activities have stood upon snow-covered peaks that felt otherworldly and felt cold air that was instantaneously painful upon their cheeks. These sensations are arresting reminders that we are outsiders to these areas. However, this feeling of detachment often leads to a *craving for*

connection, integration, and contact with the natural world. Those who ache for this kind of contact are called to further explore wild spaces. Thoreau's philosophical journey illuminates what Reid, Furtak, and Ellsworth describe as a

metaphysical discourse on appearance and reality; a burgeoning epistemology and philosophy of *perception* that quickly collapses into an *aesthetic*, bordering on the philosophy of *value*, a reference to *virtues*, and thus what appears to be a stance in *ethics* ... rooted in a philosophy of *right*, which is itself cast in ontological and aesthetic terms. (Reid et al 2012, 7)

Their examination of Thoreau emphasizes how important aspects of Thoreau's environmental philosophy are rooted in aesthetic value and virtue. Joe Fitschen, a climber and philosopher, expands on this link in his paper "Why Climb?" when he notes that while the climber's justification for climbing may be glibly summarized in the quote by famous mountaineer George Mallory "because it's there," the ethos of climbing is actually more sophisticated (Fitschen 2010, 35).

Climbers often identify an intimacy with nature, the allure of risk, and a test of personal perseverance as elements that attract them to climbing, but all of these reasons are too superficial for Fitschen. He expands on the point made by Reid, Furtak, and Ellsworth by linking aesthetic terms to the emotions climbers feel and by arguing that the intensity of the emotional experience and the aesthetic appreciation led to a serenity not found in other areas of sport. This distinctive serenity, paired with the struggle of a slow-moving, adrenaline-filled climb is identical to what Thoreau describes feeling in his descent of Mt. Katahdin. The awe of his own body, a possession that binds him, is in contrast with a craving for an external connection with the unfamiliar world around him.

Climbing is not the only form of outdoor activity that seeks an external interdependence with the natural world. This sentiment can be seen in all disciplines of outdoor recreation. Thoreau examines the value of freedom in *Walden*. His dwelling apart from other people awakened a connection to nature by recognizing his dependence on a benevolent nature. The feeling of freedom

in nature is dependent on nature's beneficence. Similarly, the commitment we have to nature, as Thoreau describes it, is not through ownership or dominion but through understanding, care, and love (Cafaro 2000, 38). The feeling of freedom is then best described as a collaboration between nature and human experience, and it is dependent on cultivating associated virtues. Cafaro explores virtue ethics in *Walden* by saying "*Walden* suggests the rudiments of an environmental virtue ethics which sees human excellence and nature's excellence as necessarily intertwined. We cannot flourish without a healthy, diverse, and partly wild environment, to take us outside ourselves and open up possibilities for physical, spiritual, moral, aesthetic and scientific development" (Cafaro 2000, 42).

Cafaro expresses an understanding that seems evident but is worth describing. Outdoor recreation is dependent on nature. While this seems obvious, assessing it as related to virtue ethics leads us to an investigation of how we may overstep an appropriate level of dependence in expeditions. As technological improvements become more common in expeditions and adventure sports, objectives may require overreaching the appropriate amount of human intervention and may violate the balance between extremes that virtue implies. While Cafaro and Thoreau explore environmental virtue ethics in general terms, I will investigate the specific virtues that are consonant with the aims of professional and recreational athletes in outdoor activities.

The six virtues of outdoor recreation that I recommend for consideration are: collaboration, education, athleticism, stewardship, sport empowerment and temperance. Collaboration is employment of consensus-based decision making between the athlete, the athlete's team, and the environment. Athletes must consider how their objective affects the natural component of their activity and promote the shared benevolence of nature and participant. Education requires the participant to either learn from or promote future learning in the activity itself. Athleticism implores the athlete to strive for personal athletic improvement in their activity through mind and body wellness. Stewardship promotes preservation of the environment and expresses an aspiration toward

appreciation and care of the natural world. Sport empowerment promotes the advancement of a discipline. An athlete should advance and refine the sport in their practice. Lastly, temperance is the participant's ability to moderate the indulgence or passion of their activity. A temperate participant will not be driven by excess appetites for fame or personal success if aiming for success comes into conflict with other virtues.

I suggest these virtues define the attributes of a virtuous participant in outdoor sport and recreation, but further investigation is needed to uncover when and how participants violate these virtues. Being first, utilizing excess support, and enabling epics are the challenges I will explore in the following sections to demarcate when these virtues support excellence in the sport and when an excess becomes vice.

III. The Value of Firsts

Throughout human history there has been a calling to explore unknown territory, perform dangerous feats, and accomplish what others have been unable to do. Ingrained in this long tenure of achieving the seemingly unachievable, there exists a limiting factor of credited firsts. Outdoor sports are often driven by the desire to be recognized as the first person to achieve a goal, and more firsts are constantly being defined and promoted.

Pushing boundaries also happens in other areas of sport. The nature of sport is to expand the physical capabilities of individuals and humanity in general. In the sport of distance running, Eliud Kipchoge has recently pushed the limit of possibility by being the first person to complete a sub two-hour marathon. His 2019 athletic achievement illuminates what is possible, but, while impressive, his achievement doesn't meet the requirements to count in the record books as a world-record time. The reason this achievement doesn't receive official credit is due to the support he received. Kipchoge ran with a dense rotation of professional pacesetters to keep him moving at a

consistent rate, and his achievement was performed at a very specific geographical location under private marathon conditions. It was not at all refuted by Kipchoge or his team that his time was not added into the record books. Instead, it was treated more as a test of what is physically possible—and Kipchoge proved that it was indeed possible to run a marathon in under two hours.

Kipchoge, his team, and Nike (the sponsor), understood that this feat could not lead to a world record, yet their action fulfilled the virtues defined above. A sub-two hour marathon had never been performed before, and in doing so, Kipchoge and his team were promoting the athleticism, education, temperance, and empowerment of the sport of distance running. Even though the achievement doesn't become one for the record books, their understanding of the achievement's objectives meets the criteria for a virtuous athletic achievement.

However, in adventure sports like mountaineering, similar achievements are made with the use of extensive support and are counted, certified and entered into the record books. Likely the most notable first in mountaineering is the 1953 expedition to climb Mount Everest. In imagining the march of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay toward the summit of Mt. Everest, one might think of a lonely and isolated trek through snow and ice-covered, windblown, truly wild landscape. However, upon further investigation one will find that 350 porters, 20 Sherpas, and tons of supplies were used to support a team of ten official climbers which ultimately led to the summit opportunity for Hillary and Norgay (Galland 2003, 23). By both past and modern standards for mountaineering, this was an exorbitant amount of support for a single expedition. This was not a solo trek, nor a self-supported voyage. However, it illuminates the value athletes place on being first. Many had tried to summit this peak before, and many had failed and died. Yet, even though support was given, it is Hillary and Norgay who remain the mountaineers credited with the first ascent.

Excluding the obvious difference in these sport's governing bodies, we must uncover whether Hillary, Norgay, and Kipchoge differ in their virtues regarding their respective

achievements.¹ While both utilized assistance to different degrees, both seem to be empowering their sports in achieving new objectives. If acting only for fame or reward, their actions would not fulfill the empowerment described. Instead, they would possess a solely personal goal towards success and potentially be acting in excess of temperance. In looking at examples such as Kipchoge, Hillary and Norgay we can see that while fame was a byproduct, they were out to prove what was physically possible. Kipchoge understood he could not set a world record and would not be the first to run an official sub-2-hour marathon according to the conventional rules. And Hillary described his views on being first by saying, "To a mountaineer, it's of no great consequence who actually sets foot first. Often the one who puts more into the climb steps back and lets his partner stand on top first." (National Geographic 2021). While this is an admirable opinion, some modern mountaineers and adventure athletes may have lost sight of this attitude.

Apart from the athlete's personal intentions, which cannot always be known, we must address the limit 'being first' has on the virtues of empowerment, temperance, athleticism, and collaboration. While being first would generally fulfill the empowerment of a sport by pushing its limits of possibility, perhaps there are instances when a first can limit the expansion of the sport.

Further, as new expansions of outdoor sport are found, our collaboration with nature may also be tested. With the evolution of indoor climbing and plastic climbing holds, some land owners who are interested in attracting recreational climbers have begun a practice of placing artificial holds onto natural rock walls. Earlier this year I spoke with a land owner near Zion National Park who was interested in building a recreational climbing space for tourists. His land includes natural sandstone rock walls that are often sought after by rock climbers. However, in our discussion, I quickly learned that he was not interested in maintaining a natural rock wall for his guests. Instead,

¹ This is a loose term when considering mountaineering since at the time of the 1953 expedition a recognized governing body did not exist for mountaineering with the same level of validation as the World Athletics (the certifying body for running events).

his intention was to permanently affix artificial plastic holds onto a rock surface to maximize and regularize the climbing experience. Instances like this present an important distinction to be made in the sport of rock climbing. Due to the rising popularity of indoor climbing and the introduction of indoor climbing holds to natural spaces, we may be running a risk of removing rock from the sport all together. A related example of this action has been made popular by the Red Bull short documentary “360 Ascent: The World’s Longest Artificial Multi-pitch Route.” In this film, climbers ascend a multi-pitch climbing route made with plastic climbing holds affixed to a chimney of an abandoned power station. While the athletes are indeed the first to complete this climb, does the introduction of indoor holds to an outdoor space violate our virtues? I argue that it does not. Instead, since the holds are not being placed directly onto natural rock walls, the team of 360 Ascent is not violating virtue of collaboration as much they are neglecting it completely. By only subscribing to climb on manufactured materials affixed to manmade surfaces a similarity is exposed with the case within indoor climbing.

Initially, climbing gyms were intended as an all-season facility to prepare athletes for the outdoor rock-climbing season. Their purpose was to assist training for the real goal, outdoor rock climbing. Driven by popularity, advanced competition styles, and recreational benefits, indoor climbing has become a pursuit in and of itself, and the natural component—the rock itself—is no longer an essential part of the sport. However, even when climbing takes place in an indoor facility on manufactured surfaces, the modified sport does not necessarily violate the virtue of collaboration with nature and instead remains neutral. Indoor climbing can indeed act as an avenue for empowerment and athleticism. By focusing on the indoor discipline of climbing the sport has spread to communities that would not otherwise have an access to outdoor climbing areas. Additionally, by offering a place for climbers to train year-round, recreational athletes can visit their local climbing

gym and succeed at becoming the first to climb new artificial routes, benefiting their own athleticism, setting personal bests, and create friendly competition to advance the sport.

However, the question that must be asked is, if rock climbing moves toward a primarily indoor adventure, does it remain neutral in its collaboration with the outdoors or is it neglecting its responsibility for the natural component responsible for the foundation of the sport? This could happen, for instance, if rock faces in natural areas were altered to accommodate novice climbers. At what point does our drive for new accomplishments begin to encroach on the natural areas of outdoor recreation? As we dominate areas and manufacture new firsts this neutrality can indeed become a neglect or a violation of a sports collaboration with nature.

IV. Support and Assistance

While the importance of being first and the drive for sport empowerment are not new goals for outdoor sports, a clearer distinction should be made to establish when the support used by participants may violate certain virtues. I will argue that the excessive use of support and assistance runs the risk of undermining the virtues of collaboration with nature, personal athleticism, and perhaps temperance. Few alpinists and mountaineers would argue that Hillary and Norgay were overstepping the bounds of appropriate support in trekking mount Everest for the first time in 1953. Yet, with the expanding technology and improvements in equipment, further assessment must be made of how support and assistance are used in adventurous achievements.

Colin O’Brady, professional endurance athlete and author of *The Impossible First* is a recent example of how endurance athletes can overstep the bounds of appropriate support. O’Brady’s objective was to be the first person to achieve a solo, unsupported, self-propelled crossing of the landmass of Antarctica. His book highlights his journey but the trek has come under recent scrutiny from other polar explorers and adventure athletes. O’Brady completed his feat on December 26th

2018, and the achievement was certified by Antarctica Logistics and Expeditions (ALE), which acts as a certifying body for polar expeditions. While the ALE is often firm with their definitions of what constitutes support (even a cup of coffee or a proper restroom can disqualify athletes), the ALE judges of O’Brady’s attempt had thoroughly examined all possible violations of the support clauses.

While O’Brady did not receive a cup of hot coffee or use a proper bathroom for his trek, the last 366 miles followed the South Pole Traverse (SPoT). The SPoT, often referred to as the McMurdo-South Pole Highway, is a road intended for vehicular travel from the South Pole to McMurdo Antarctic Research Station (McMurdo) on the south tip of Ross Island.² The SPoT travels for a total of 995 miles and was constructed by leveling snow and filling in dangerous crevasses. Flags mark its route to assist researchers in driving to the South Pole from McMurdo. Further, O’Brady’s route was much shorter than that of previous attempts. It was shorter by 932 miles compared to the 1,864 mile route used by Norwegian Borge Ousland in 1997 (see figure 1). I argue that in utilizing the SPoT and shortening the journey, O’Brady violates the collaboration and empowerment virtues of outdoor sport.

By utilizing the SPoT, O’Brady cannot claim to be in collaboration with nature throughout his attempt. The wild areas of Antarctica are filled with crevasses and sastrugi which would make a polar trek significantly more taxing and certainly more dangerous.³ Both of these features are eliminated on the SPoT. Certainly, climbing a mountain via a snow-covered road would not have the same collaboration with nature as would a trek to the peak via an unmarked trail. Instead, this highlights a dominion over nature as opposed to an attitude of collaboration or shared benevolence. Further, by removing the Ronne and Ross ice shelves from the objective, O’Brady significantly shortened the expedition by approximately two times the width of France.⁴ Since Ousland had

² Ross island is often considered to be a part of the Antarctic mainland due to the presence of the Ross Ice Shelf.

³ Sastrugi (or zastrugi) are parallel ridges of eroded snow that are caused by wind.

⁴ France is 590mi wide (East to West) compared to 520mi and 500mi of the Ronne and Ross ice shelves respectively.

previously completed a trek across this additional distance, O’Brady also acted against the virtue of empowerment. In shortening this already completed distance, O’Brady can no longer be credited with advancing the sport by neglecting these sections. Similarly, if a climber were to skip a pitch of a climb, they could not claim they had completed the climb in full.

If Ousland’s attempt is indeed more virtuous, why are these attempts comparable? While Ousland’s attempt is considered the gold standard for solo Antarctic expedition, Ousland too could not claim to be fully unsupported.⁵ During his expedition, he used a kitelike device that was used to boost his speed when the wind was in a favorable direction. However, while considered assistance by organizations like the ALE, Ousland does not violate the virtues of outdoor recreation. On the contrary, by utilizing the wind to assist his expedition and not utilizing the SPoT, Ousland deepens a collaboration with nature. Namely, the assistance he used was to take advantage of a force of nature without changing or diminishing that force. Also, in pursuing the longest solo crossing of the Antarctic, Ousland empowered his sport and advanced his athleticism. His use of a kite required athleticism and specialized skill and did not diminish the need for his navigational skill, while using a road that had been marked and packed did eliminate the need for O’Brady to make use of navigational skill.

While O’Brady maintains a claim to the first solo unsupported expedition across Antarctica, the feat has become a prime example of the distinctions between athlete characteristics in the arena of expedition ethics. Jonathan Simon makes the distinction between “‘mountaineers’ – who draw value from relationships with the environment” and “‘summiteers’- who focus on the individual quest to reach the summit by whatever means necessary” (Simon 2002, 181). Pam Sailors expands upon Simon’s distinction further by describing the summiteer as being goal oriented, interested in

⁵ Some organizations label Ousland’s expedition as unsupported but will generally note kite-supported as a further distinction.



Figure 1. National Geographic
 (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/the-problem-with-colin-obrady>)

attaining self-knowledge or self-affirmation and being concerned only with themselves to the point of neglecting others' needs (Sailors 2010, 83).

To a degree, dangerous sports expect this behavior. When athletes spend money, devote time to training and planning, travel many miles, and spend time apart from loved ones in search of a goal, it is easy to expect that athletes are inherently self-motivated in their actions as summiteers. In contrast to the summiteer, the mountaineer is concerned with the process more than focusing on the goal alone. A mountaineer is interested in achieving self-transcendence and self-knowledge, and may show moral responsibility to others involved in the process, including the mountain itself.

Sailors argues that being a mountaineer is better than being a summiteer and should be sought after more frequently in situations like O'Brady's. She states that adventure sport is valuable "but only if it is undertaken for the right reasons" (Sailors 2010, 83). This leaves it up to the other

mountaineers and summiteers alike to decide, as a community, about what the right reasons are. Certainly, doubt is raised by cases like O’Brady’s, but it is unlikely we will ever be able to identify the true reasons a particular person seeks dangerous achievements. While Sailors and Simon present a basic definition of virtuous mountaineers, I don’t believe there is usually sufficient evidence about a person’s intention to distinguish one athlete’s virtue from another’s vice. Instead, their account provides arguments that should convince athletes which intention to develop in themselves. My approach to virtue is not dependent on assessing the intentions of participants. A benefit of my approach is that it allows us to assess achievements from an external perspective by examining the relationships that athletes develop to nature and their communities. Thus, examining how assistance is used allows us to analyze whether a feat is collaborative with nature and whether it empowers the sport. We must look at the method, the process, and the materials used to help distinguish the motivations between mountaineers and summiteers or between virtuous and unvirtuous outdoor athletes.

Sailors hints at this relationship between the methods athlete use to achieve their goals and the character values of these two types of climbers. Summiteering, by her account “often reduces to the goal of getting to the summit (preferably first, fastest, or with the greatest display of fitness by, for example, proceeding without oxygen in a high-altitude ascent)” (82). I will take Sailors’ point one step further: instead of disjunction between these preferences, it is a conjunction of values that pushes the summiteer. In the case of Colin O’Brady, we see the culmination of a summiteering mindset by being goal oriented and self-affirming, but with neglect of the greatest display of fitness and collaboration with nature.

Sailors’ account makes it difficult to tell when the preferences may be attributed to mountaineers or summiteers. By using a goal-oriented approach to identify whether or not a participant has acted virtuously, we ultimately reduce our philosophy to consequentialism. If the goal

is achieved, it can become very difficult to tell a mountaineer from a summiteer. However, while Ousland and O’Brady both achieved their respective objectives, we are able to distinguish the two by expanding upon Sailors’ blueprint.

V. Formal and Informal Competition

At some point the goal-oriented drive of summiteering leads to both formal and informal competition. Adventure sports are often without the ability to have spectators or the oversight of certifying bodies and are often not performed in synchronous or direct competition with other athletes. My analysis of the role of competition in adventure sports highlights why adventure sports should adopt a virtue-driven ethic to evaluate achievements. I will examine how the role of formal and informal competition affects the assessment of virtue in outdoor sports. Does competition complement or challenge the virtues of outdoor recreation?

While there is certainly an overlap between the drive to be first and the competitive nature of any sport, it is in the nature of adventure sports that there is a higher level of danger and it is more difficult to observe and control the conditions than in organized team sports with well-defined rules that take place on courses or in arenas. The outdoor, natural, and often remote setting creates difficulties in determining the rules of competition, and the less governed nature of the competition creates opportunities for athletes to successfully attain a recognized achievement while potentially violating the virtues that should guide these sports.

Competition can come in many forms for sporting activity (1) competition with self, nature, or chance to achieve the objective (2) direct competition with others (3) removed or indirect competition with others. The first of these encompasses the type of competition I analyzed above, when an athlete competes to be the first person to attain an objective, but it can also present when an athlete works to obtain a personally challenging goal. Direct competition would be consistent

with the common understanding of sports competitions, such as footraces, basketball games, swim meets, and soccer matches. Adventure sports have recently begun to participate in this category through backcountry ski and snowboard competitions like the Freeride World Tour, ski mountaineering races (SKIMO), adventure races, and events like Horseshoe Hell (a 24hour climbing competition in Arkansas). Lastly, removed or indirect competition is when more than one athlete or team attempts to achieve the same goal or the fastest time toward the goal but the attempts occur asynchronously with one another.

Competition in all of these forms most prominently aligns with the virtues of athleticism and sport empowerment. In training and competing for a performance, athletes are striving for personal athletic improvement. Further, in striving for their own improvement, athletes can affect the overall advancement of the sport. As world records, speed records, and other achievements proliferate, athletes are expanding the bounds of what can be considered possible within sport and are crafting a route for continued progression.

While it seems promising that competition is essential to the virtues of sport empowerment and athleticism, there are cases where competition potentially hinders other virtues. Indoor climbing competition presents this type of example. Indoor climbing has become increasingly popular and is awaiting its Olympic debut for the Summer Games of 2021. While the sport of indoor climbing originated as a way for climbers to train for outdoor climbs in the off-season, indoor climbing has in many ways advanced beyond its outdoor predecessor and has established itself at the forefront of climbing competition. Manufactured walls, plastic holds, carefully curated climbs, and governing organizations to regulate competitions have essentially founded a new paradigm in climbing sport. Some athletes will compete their entire career without ever venturing onto real rock. Has competition led the charge for this industry? Have other outdoor sports seen this type of paradigm shift away from nature?

The production of indoor climbing competition and an industry to support it is unlike anything seen in other outdoor sport competition. In the Olympic realm, surfing and whitewater kayaking are competitions that have adjusted their platforms for the Olympic stage. In surfing, the activity still takes place in naturally created ocean waves. Little has been done to remove the sport from this environment because of the integral role saltwater has on the buoyancy and physics of surfing that are essential to the competition. In whitewater kayaking, most events have accepted that water levels are often unpredictable and have established manmade whitewater facilities to create rapids that can be managed and where spectators can observe the competition. Yet, even while making accommodations from its natural origins, water is still integral to the whitewater kayaking competition.

Climbing, on the other hand, has removed rock entirely from its competition format. I argue that this violates the collaboration virtue of outdoor recreation. The Olympic commission argues that this is in fact to preserve the environment. They state that “In the early 1990s, it was decreed that international events would take place on purposely designed infrastructures only, leaving the natural environment without impact. One of the sport’s core values is the preservation of the environment, with climbers bearing responsibility for the upkeep of the settings in which they climb” (Olympic.org). However, I don’t believe this is indeed a bearing or upkeep of responsibility. Instead, it is a neglect of collaboration. Consider another outdoor entity, the national parks service. They have the responsibility to care for the parks and to maintain their resources and infrastructure despite accommodating millions of visitors each year. If they, in receiving this responsibility, were to close their doors to visitors, this would not be proof of caring for the natural environment. Instead, it would seem more like a failed execution of their duties to promote a relationship between humans and nature. National parks should be given the means to protect these areas and adapt to the visitors because the collaboration and education they provide plays an essential role in creating public

support for the long-term sustainability of these places. Therefore, the sport of climbing has taken the easy way out by removing the natural component, and in doing so it is partially responsible for negative effects that may occur for outdoor climbing area use and climbing industries. Had the sport truly accepted its role, the virtues of collaboration, education, and stewardship would be better fulfilled by the indoor activity that is so prevalent in the industry today.

Athleticism may also be at fault for driving competition to extremes. In the sport of climbing, manufactured walls and holds are produced for human hands, and this adds to the anthropocentrism of the sport.⁶ A similar issue arises in whitewater kayaking because prepared rapids can be more easily read by the paddler, and downhill skiing has become adapted to ski runs where trees and rocks are removed and the trails are groomed with packed manufactured snow.

However, it's possible this point can be taken too far. A possible objection to the claim that adapting a sport to increase athleticism is a detriment to the sport is that these adaptations in fact produce a higher purity of athleticism. When sporting events are judged, controlling these factors generates an even playing field, which can make it easier to discern between athletes' abilities. I spoke with Tory Hillenbrand, a route setter and lifelong climber to discuss the purity of climbing. He explained that indoor climbing is the purest form of climbing since it is focused on the activity itself. Indoor climbing is designed to pursue pure movement: manufactured holds are intended for human hands; routes are specifically placed to present new pure movements intended for the human body; and the climatic conditions are a constant and ideal temperature with no chance of rain. He admits that while this desire for purity drives climbers to progress, outdoor climbing is sought after precisely because of the challenge of taking perfect movement to imperfect conditions. This point

⁶ A potential objection to this claim is that the climbing hold can also be made purposefully more difficult to push the athleticism of competitors. However, I think this claim is also flawed. Human anatomy drives the ease or difficulty level of a climbing hold, and taking control of this factor makes climbing more centered on humans and less on the natural conditions that confront us.

can be extended to cover all forms of outdoor sports and recreation. Yet, this creates a confusing contradiction. If outdoor athletes aim to achieve perfection under imperfect conditions, is there an additional problem when athletes pursue only the most *epic* of situations?

VI. Epic Value

In outdoor sports there is an increasingly prevalent drive to seek out the most extreme of situations and scenarios. As stated in the previous sections, support and assistance, competitions, and alterations to a sport are accepted on the basis of providing the possibility for the purest form of the activity. If this is so, shouldn't athletes, both professional and recreational, seek only the most precarious and difficult conditions possible to pit themselves against nature and maximize the quality of their outdoor experience? For climbers, skiers, and mountaineers, should every activity occur in the rain or snow with tormenting wind?

Perhaps what unfolds here is a specific kind of value. The value that athletes find in performing grand, superhuman feats in the most impossible of conditions does have promise for yielding the desired benefits. Exciting climbing films and books generally do not document events where the objective was simple, and it was completed in a straightforward way in perfect conditions. Instead, the most popular films and books are those that document drama. They cause viewers or readers to question the mentality of the athlete performing such feats under such conditions!

Even for recreational athletes, an exciting story certainly is more entertaining around a campfire than that of an easy excursion. Humans appreciate storytelling and these experiences allow us to practice this art. Such narratives dramatize what we think of our place in the world, how we deal with adversity, and character traits like resourcefulness and courage. Epic adventures produce a story consisting of heroic feats that are grand in scale.

What should we make of the epic quality of outdoor adventures? When these factors are within the athlete's control, we must ask ourselves if dramatic, dangerous experiences are sought after on purpose, and, if so, how does this reflect the value of these expeditions? Often an epic is controlled by factors outside the athlete's control, but occasionally these situations are preventable. A recent *New York Times* article emphasizes the toll that uneducated and dramatized experiences have on the rescue teams responsible for the wilderness areas. Kenna Tanner of the Tip Top search and rescue team in the Wind River Mountain Range in Wyoming, says that she wishes people had more respect for the risk involved in wilderness activities. She says "If people are going to do this, then they've got to prepare themselves and we've got to do more public education to try to prepare these people" (Watkins 2021). However, even when there is an opportunity to prevent the development of dangerous conditions, athletes may purposefully choose less favorable situations in order to have a story. They may set for themselves a goal that is challenging in ways that are not necessarily required.

Outdoor enthusiasts are no strangers to "Type II fun." There are outdoor experiences that fall under ideal conditions, ideal athleticism, and ideal company. Activities in this category are Type I fun, truly enjoyable experiences that are enjoyable at the time they occur (Cordes, REI). Alternatively, there are experiences when conditions are not ideal but enthusiasts have a positive mindset and, in retrospect, are favorable to reminisce. These are considered to be Type II fun. Lastly, Type III fun would be activities that lack all other aspects generally referred to as 'fun.' These are activities that are terrible at the time they are happening and are painful to reminisce. These present in the forms of mud-filled treks on hot, humid, bug-filled trails. They are remembered not fondly but with thoughts like "I'm lucky to be alive" or "What was I thinking?" An epic generally falls into the second and third category of fun. However, often poor preparation and neglect of the process leads to more dangerous situations or 'near misses' in outdoor situations. Likely, all

experienced outdoor enthusiasts have encountered some of these types of situations, but I argue they can generally be avoided. On the contrary, occasionally these types of situations are sought after either purposefully or via neglect and poor preparation in hopes of collecting more stories and being able to document these “epic” experiences through retelling the experience to others.

Possessing a penchant for suffering is in some ways a necessary attribute for outdoor enthusiasts. However, I want to examine how an outing becomes epic, whether they are sought after intentionally, and whether seeking an epic adventure compromises the goals of enthusiasts in a way that is similar to how being a “summiteer” compromises the virtues of mountaineers. In the same way that a summiteer is exclusively focused on attaining a goal rather than engaging in a process, those who pursue epic adventures may cause unnecessary risks to themselves or others without increasing the number or quality of the virtues they pursue. By manufacturing a situation that creates a more unique challenge, enthusiasts risk tainting the reputation of outdoor adventure sports while causing dangerous situations for themselves and others.

To illustrate this point, I will consider an example from the sport of climbing. Alex Honnold is a professional rock climber made famous by the Oscar-winning film *Free Solo*. Free soloing involves climbing a rock face with no ropes or protection to stop a fall. The act is portrayed as a private and meditative experience without any of the distractions of standard rock climbing. But as Marcus Agnafors discusses in his paper “The Ethics of Free Soloing,” (2010) the activity isn’t as independent as it is generally presented. Bystanders, family, and loved ones feel a responsibility to call for help, provide care and CPR, or anticipate the worst possible phone call should a climber fall. Jimmy Chin, director and cameraman for the documentary *Free Solo* reflects on this emotion during the film by confronting the real possibility of “[watching] your friend falling through the frame” (Chin 2018). While the risk is certainly higher for a free solo climb compared to other types of rock

climbing, at its deepest level it seems to present the climber as having questionable character in being willing to commit friends and family and strangers to observe their possibly fatal action.

Free Soloists generally present their risky climbs as the most freeing and pure action of their practice. Derek Hersey, a famous free solo climber, presents support for this in saying “You’re thinking, but not in words. You’re thinking in movement and rhythm” (Swan 2010,126). The pursuit of purity of movement potentially brings the highest form of athletic fulfillment, but the definition of what’s pure isn’t very clear. If the intention is to take pure action in imperfect conditions, then all climbs should be performed in the worst possible conditions in order to claim the highest feat. However, this too would lead to questionable, and often selfish, choices. Perhaps this character distinction is the sole identifier of the *epic* climber.

It is certainly possible for epic circumstances to occur when the weather changes or when there is an equipment failure despite the best attempt to prepare and control for these possibilities. But I have seen first-hand how some participants knowingly neglect to look at the weather report or neglect to inspect their equipment before leaving for a climb. It is this kind of neglect that brings the character of a climber, skier, or mountaineer into question. Purposefully increasing risk or neglecting to analyze risk because of hubris increases the chance of experiencing an epic adventure, but it simultaneously increases the risk to oneself, to other athletes, to bystanders, and to the reputation of the sport. In any form of climbing, ropes may break and equipment may fail but purposefully beginning without these items, as the free soloist does, presents a neglect for risk akin to beginning a ski descent in dangerous avalanche conditions.

Outside factors may also increase the intention to pursue epic conditions. The popularity and social currency awarded to film contributors and the media budgets of producers like Red Bull have exploded these outrageous circumstances into the mainstream, normalizing them and making them seem achievable to enthusiasts. Red Bull’s marketing videos adopt this concept. Driving an F1

car on ice with tire chains, whitewater kayaking down a snowy Chilean volcano, skiing and paragliding through the confines of a resort: these objectives seek out unnecessarily wild and hazardous conditions in order to display achievements of epic proportions. Matt Groom of the popular YouTube channel Climbing Daily from EpicTV sums up the goals of Red Bull videos to produce advertisements “[that are] ridiculous but really cool” (Groom & Corti). Essentially, a Red Bull project is only concerned with providing an amplified experience for its viewers.

I believe this goes one step beyond just providing outrageous perceptions; it also leads to an exploitation of the sport itself. A Red Bull project referenced earlier in this paper, 360 Ascent, is a perfect illustration of the problem. A critical response from Fanatic Climbing about this project discusses in part its violation to empower the sport and provide an educational opportunity for viewers (Fanatic). Years of preparation, tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of climbing holds, for 19 hours of climbing and a wasted opportunity for empowerment, education, and collaboration show that the manner in this case is flawed. The article continues in saying

“Red Bull could have taken the opportunity of this project, for instance, to try and draw more people into an area of climbing that is often kept under the radar: multi-pitch climbing, and to offer pedagogical content to young audiences in order to help grow a ‘multi-pitch culture’. Alas: the sole angle in view is commercial with endorsed athletes, partnership with a holds company, and no other message whatsoever. This vanity project was all but ephemeral. We are not even graced with information on what befell those two tons of holds afterwards. Yet at the same time the video is presented to us as some kind of expedition. Sorry, but in terms of adventure spirit, it doesn’t pass muster. To think how close numerous alpine multi-pitch routes are to those champions, and the holds company [headquarters]... On the other hand, help regarding the management of natural areas is still nowhere to be

[seen]. Despite the originality of the idea and the financial means behind the project, we regret that Red Bull did not take this opportunity to at least show and promote a bit of the great Slovenian outdoors. At a time when the defense and maintenance of natural areas is becoming of such crucial importance in Europe, including in Slovenia, this production feels out of kilter.” (Fanatic)

As the drive for epic expeditions and objectives becomes more popular, I believe missed opportunities like 360 Ascent will become more common. Certainly, more must be done to consider all of these virtues within outdoor recreation to continue the core passion and values that exist within the activities themselves. The drive for epic experiences violates many of the virtues outlined in this thesis. Cases like 360 Ascent limit collaboration of athletes in their community and with the environment, neglect potential educational opportunities, and are not temperate in their pursuit. The appetite for excessive risk, outlandish objectives and the stories that accompany them drives athletes and recreational participants to weaken the sport’s integrity. There is no escaping the risks involved in adventure sport, but seeking out preventable hazards jeopardizes the sport and the stakeholders within each discipline.

VII. Conclusion

Outdoor sport and recreation provides opportunities for personal growth, self-affirmation, education and an enjoyable experience. Equally as important to the value outdoor activity has is the virtuosity of the actions of those who take part in them. Environmental thinkers such as Muir and Thoreau saw how wilderness experiences can lead to self-improvement, the betterment of society, and the preservation of wild places. Today, adventure sports, outdoor recreation, and wilderness activities provide these opportunities to

professional and recreational participants and, vicariously, to enthusiasts who read about the accomplishments of others, but achieving virtue through outdoor recreation requires increasing an awareness of what we must do to preserve the virtue and integrity of outdoor sports.

The cases explored in this thesis have highlighted some of the challenges outdoor sport and recreation face. They are less likely to result in self-affirmation and preservation of nature when the point of a sports endeavor becomes achieving personal fame or a hair-raising story rather than appreciating the process of planning and achieving a successful outdoor adventure. The cases analyzed throughout this paper show that the recommended virtues of collaboration, education, athleticism, stewardship, sport empowerment, and temperance, can be used to establish better judgment toward outdoor sports, the athletes and recreational users, and the objectives themselves.

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