

# Pre-Competition Rituals in Men's Professional Soccer: A Performance of Everyday Life

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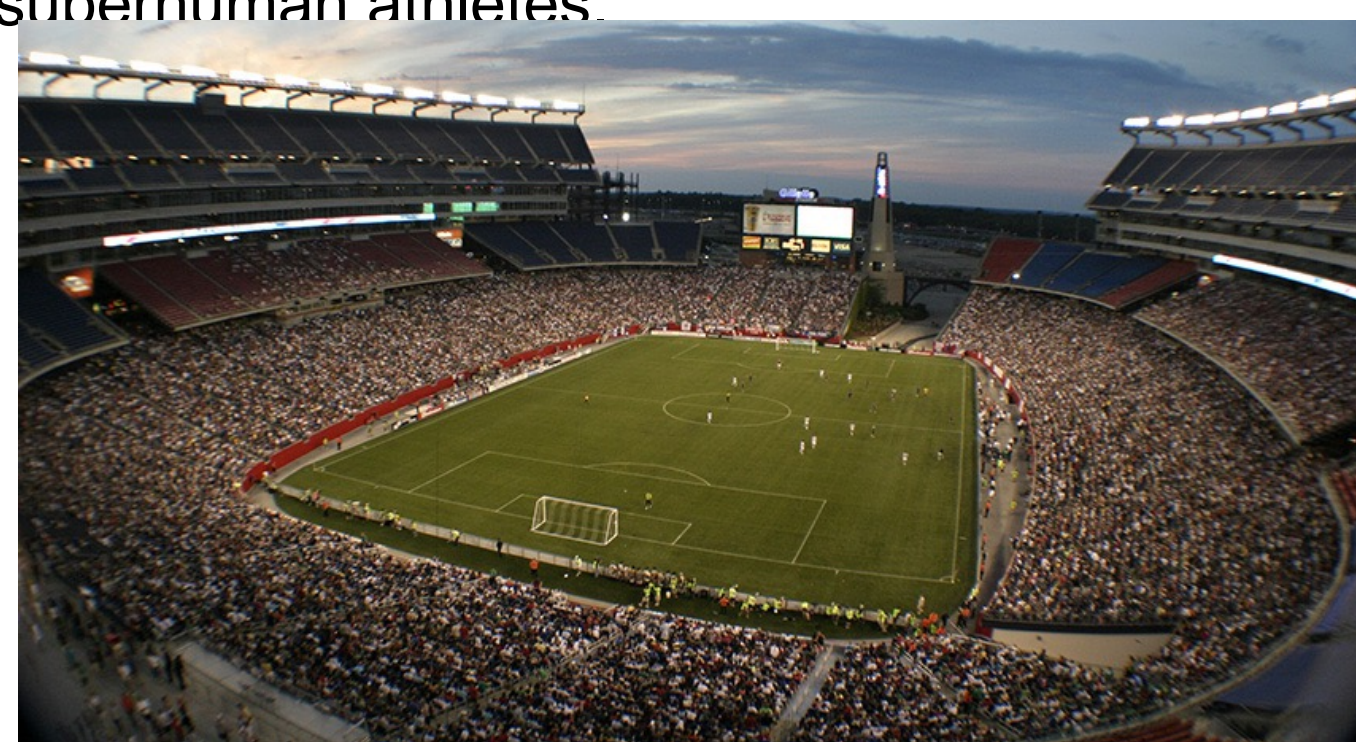
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## Taking the Field

"...any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct."

-Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

The game field is the stage for the soccer player's performance. The entrance is dramatic, with the team walking out to the stadium in a linear fashion, accompanied by music. The order in which the players walk out reflects a social hierarchy, with the team captains and goalie leading the line, followed by the starters, and finally the nonstarters. Because the team's entrance is observed by both the live fans and the camera, the ritual takes on a ceremonial quality which requires the members of the team to maintain a certain code of conduct appropriate to the fans' perception of them as athletes. In alignment with the values of modern American society, the ideal role model for American culture is a successful, powerful, and emotionally-tough male, which every member of the soccer team must embody to maintain the definition of the team's social status as a group of elite, superhuman athletes.



## Dressing for Competition

"Sport is the entire trajectory separating a combat from a riot."

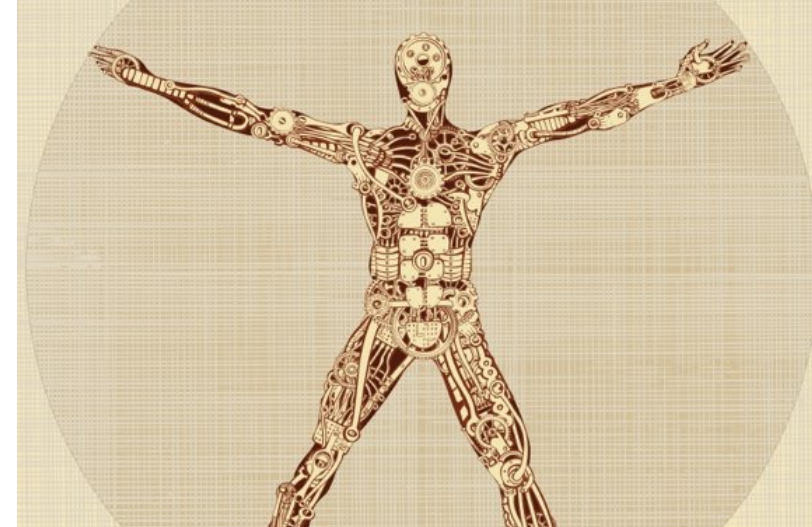
-Roland Barthes, *What Is Sport?*

The soccer player's uniform is the costume for the role he performs on the field. Featuring the team's logo along with the player's last name and number, the athlete's jersey aligns his identity even more closely with that of his team's identity. The soccer player is representing his team when he puts on his uniform, implying to the audience that all of the effort he puts out is for his team, that he is loyal to the team's mission of success and is confident in the abilities of his squad. The player's shin guards and cleats are the props necessary to prepare him for the demands of the competitive performance, which implies the expectation of violence. The expectation of violence is part of the reason the fans' derive enjoyment from the spectacle, as athletic competition is a socially permissible situation for violence. Since aggression is an innate human impulse that is generally socially reprimanded, the soccer game provides an acceptable outlet for these desires which is felt both directly by the athlete and indirectly by the fans.

## Physical Warmup

"Muscle, however precious, is never anything more than raw material. It is not muscle that wins. What wins is a certain idea of man and of the world, of man in the world."

-Roland Barthes, *What Is Sport?*



The physical warmup is the ritual which prepares the soccer players' bodies for their performance. There are both general and skill-specific warmup routines, with different objectives though they are both geared toward priming the body for optimal performance, much like how machines are tuned for maximum efficiency. The success of the team is measured through wins, the athletic form of capital within the institution of sport. Because there are monetary stakes dependent upon a team's success at the professional level, wins are the proof of productivity. The skill-specific warmup further enhances the team's productivity by splitting the team into their positional roles to warmup the skills specific to the demands of their position. Similar to the capitalist practice of Fordism, separating the team members to train their singular roles within the overall team's performance is a process designed to enhance efficiency by dividing the labor into parts, which maximizes the abilities of each player though it also alienates them from another.

## Thesis

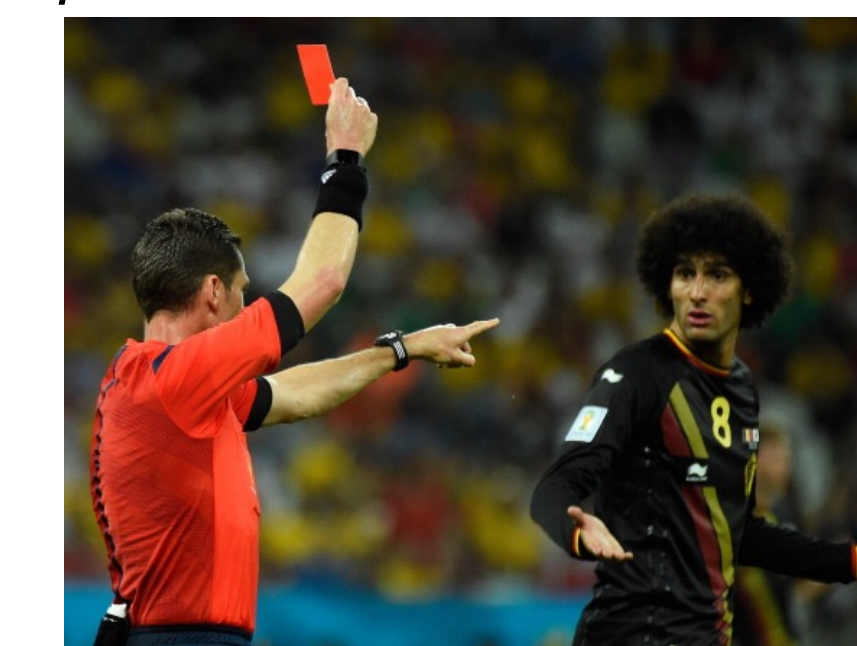
Everyday life studies is an interdisciplinary field that combines the methods and insights of performance studies, anthropology, psychology, political theory, and sociology. The study of the performance of everyday life refers to a set of ideas that assumes the world is a stage, with people playing roles in both their professional and leisurely lives. Though American society cherishes the notion of humanistic liberalism, which assumes that people are independent individuals capable of exerting free will to determine destiny, our everyday realities are largely predetermined by the cultural values conveyed by the institutions of American society. The practice and repetition of everyday ritual behaviors leads to their habituation, naturalizing these practices into invisibility.

The ritual behaviors of a pre-competition warmup in men's professional soccer demonstrate the effects of the institutionalization of sport. Because America is a capitalist, patriarchal, and classist society, the associated cultural values are reinforced through the performance of soccer. The aspects of the pre-competition warmup, which include taking the field, dressing for competition, the physical warmup, the coin toss, the announcement of starters, and the coach's pregame speech, compose a set of ritual behaviors that participate in the disavowal of the history that has determined the cultural norms embodied by professional athletes.

## Coin Toss

"And then, in sport, man does not confront man directly. There enters between them an intermediary, a stake, a machine, a puck, or a ball. And this thing is the very symbol of things: in order to possess it, to master it, that one is strong, adroit, courageous."

-Roland Barthes, *What Is Sport?*



The coin toss is the pre-competition ritual conducted by the referee that determines which team will begin the game with possession of the ball and which will pick the side of the field to start the game on. The referee, the enforcing authority of the game's laws, initiates the ritual by having the captains of the opposing teams shake hands and introduce themselves. By meeting with the captains prior to kick-off, the referee makes his presence known and reminds the players of the rules that must be followed in competition. The rules of soccer function to preserve the integrity of the game as a competition, promoting civility and setting boundaries to aggression despite the inherently violent nature of sport. Nevertheless, the combat that occurs in soccer, however violent, is not about man vs. man. The ball, a material object, is the object to be possessed and the source of conflict. Just as men fight for achievement in a capitalist society, the struggle to maintain possession of an object is the reason for competition amongst men in sport.

## Announcement of Starters

"Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of them."

-Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

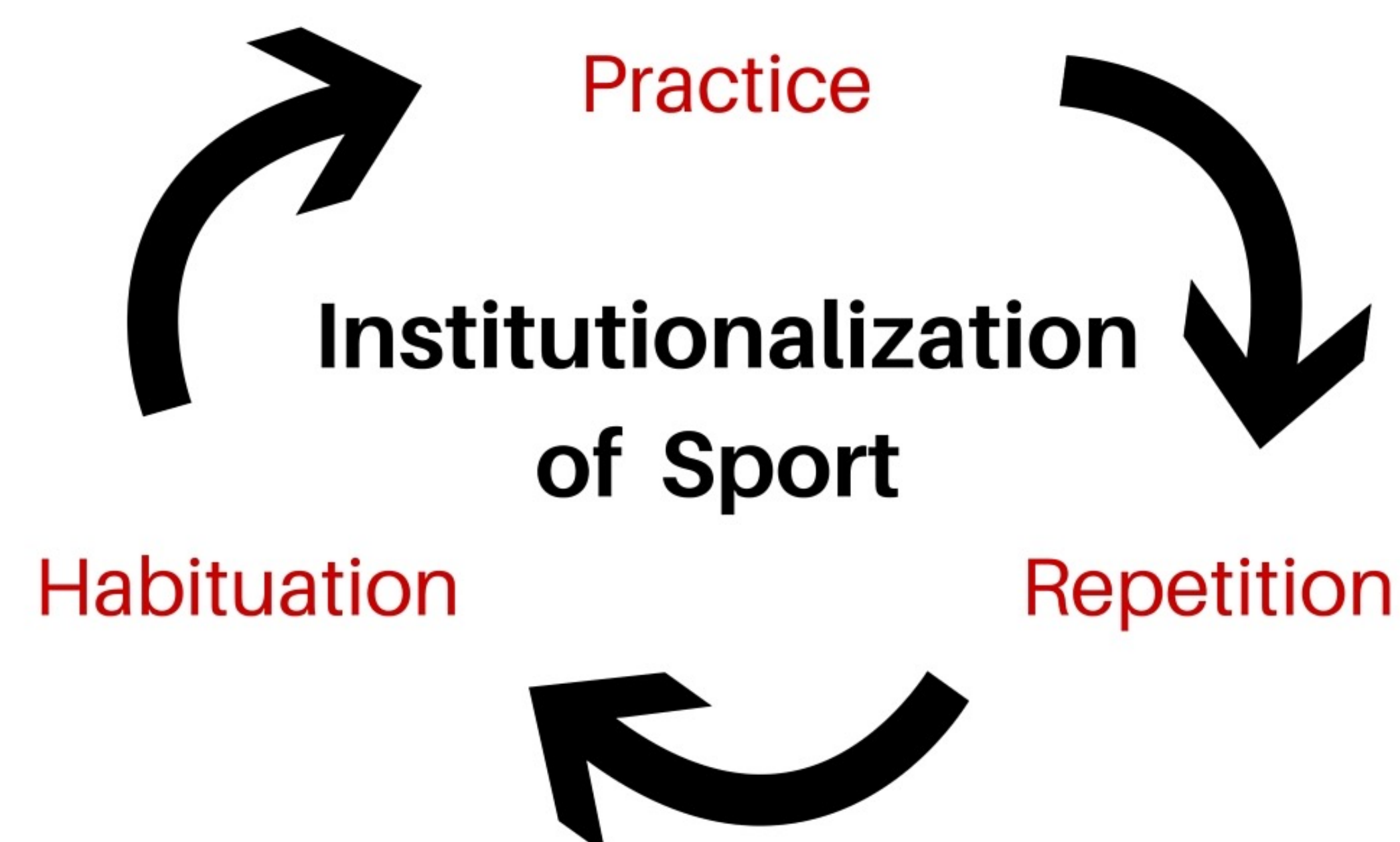
The announcement of starters signals to the audience that the competition is about to begin while also providing the spectators with an image of the dominant competitors of the match. The teams line up on the sideline, and the starters temporarily break away from their team as they are individually introduced, honored, and glorified over the stadium's speakers. The social status of each player is conveyed through the information offered, which includes the player's hometown, height, weight, age, and position. The emphasis placed on such qualities reflects a society that values attributes of masculinity and group solidarity, as the player represents his hometown in the contest. In being announced as a starter, the soccer player is identified to the fans as part of an in-group of elite athletes. Furthermore, through the fans' recognition of the player, the fans themselves come to identify with the in-group, conveyed through their support of the team.

## Coach's Pregame Speech

"We must dwell on what it is that we want to feel and on what we must do to induce the feeling."

-Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*

Moments prior to kickoff, the coach of the soccer team delivers a speech that is intended to rouse the players for competition. The speech contains both informational and emotional cues which prepare the athletes' to assume their roles on the field more deeply, as the coach reveals tactical information and offers verbal motivation. The mood that the coach wishes to inspire in his team is a manipulation of feeling that causes his players to expend emotional labor, a form of labor in which the emotions appropriate to the situation are conjured as a direct result of working on feeling. To get pumped-up, or in a state of high competitive arousal, the coach gathers the team into a huddle to speak to them passionately, while the players boost each others' morale through physical rituals such as high-fiving, cheering, and clapping. Despite whatever personal reality exists for each player off the field, the athlete is expected to display emotion appropriate to competition. Emotional labor, though invisible, costs energy to put forward, especially when the expected state differs from the actual internal state of the individual.



## The Athlete

roles: the performer and the laborer

symbol: the American hero

attributes: masculine, strong, tough, fearless, aggressive, brave, stoic, violent at times

advantages of role: glory, wealth, fame, high social status, awarded professional benefits from leisurely activity

disadvantages of role: held to impossibly high moral standards, unidimensional identity, constantly observed by the media, overworked, hubris



## The Fan

roles: the spectator and the consumer

symbol: the American masses

attributes: loyal, supportive, rowdy, enthusiastic, potentially violent

advantages of role: vicariously participates in the athlete's glory, group identity gives a sense of belonging, enhances self-esteem, fulfills desire for entertainment

disadvantages of role: self-esteem dependent on success of team, conforming, internalizes impossible standards of perfection