Welcome everyone, my name is Ajay, my name is Chayce. And you are listening to the philosophy of sport. A show where we discuss issues beyond sport, beyond who is the fastest, beyond who is the strongest, and beyond who can jump the highest.

Today the topic of discussion is measurements of athletic and fitness performance and what they actually mean. Are these measures objectively and subjectively accurate? Are they clear indicators of performance? Do they actually add to the knowledge in sport? What happens when they are incorrect and the athletes kick back? That is what we are aiming to find out today.

Before we get into the bulk of our podcast, I would like to show you a little clip to help set up our issue for today.

Lacks great physical stature and strength, lacks mobility and ability to avoid the rush, does not throw a really tight spiral, system type player who can get exposed if forced to adlib, missed the most important part, heart, they didn't understand what drives somebody. We didn't open up his chest and look at his heart, we didn't look at that and I don't know if anybody did. What kind of spine he has, and resiliency and all of the things that are making him really great right now.

I'm curious Ajay, who is that clip about?

You may be surprised to hear that they are actually talking about Tom Brady. Now for those who do not know who Tom Brady is, he is arguably the greatest quarterback to ever play in the NFL. The people in the audio clip are citing some of the comments made about Tom Brady after his performance in the NFL combine. If you notice, most of these gentlemen are citing unfavorable physical attributes of Tom Brady. Saying that he does not throw a perfect spiral, he is not calm under pressure, and other measurable things that make up a good NFL quarterback. Now this is where the issue of using athletic measurement to determine how someone will perform lies. We all know that Tom Brady went on to become a great player. But How? Did he not shit the bed when he was at the NFL combine?

Or was there another non measurable component that made him a good quarterback? This is the gap that athletic measures cannot fill. In the audio, we heard a gentlemen say that they did not open up his heart to see what kind of person he was. I believe that is the perfect statement to outline the shortcomings of athletic measurement. Humans are multidimensional and highly dynamic. Trying to quantify what type of athlete will become is more than just how fast they can run, how high they can jump, or how much weight they can lift off of their chest. Its more than numbers.

So what you are saying is, physical measurements aren't everything in sport. There is something more that is immeasurable or we can't measure currently, that makes specific athletes great. I mean there are tons of other athletes that come to mind that break that mold. You look at Steph Curry in the NBA. He was labelled too small, not physical enough, and he is arguably one of the best players in the league, he is an MVP. Athletes coming in that over perform what their physical ability should be based on who they are as a person and their intangibles and their heart.

So here is a question for you then, do we need physical measurements to add drama to sport? Are physical measurements the reason people watch sports?

I think definitely, you look at between teams, everyone always wants the underdog to win, they always want the smaller guy, the small scrappy team or small scrappy player to do well. And there are definitely examples of where players are physically gifted and supposed to do well. On paper they have every single tool to be successful, and the world kicks back the opposite direction and those players see little to no success. The first one that comes to mind for me is Ryan Leaf. Leaf was drafted is 1998 2nd overall behind Peyton Manning who arguably was big slow, not viewed as the most athletic guy at the time, who has turned out to be one of the best quarterbacks of all time. Ryan Leaf had everything Peyton Manning didn't have, and within four years had played for numerous teams and was out of the league.

Every field has its own method of evaluating human talent, but after the 1998 NFL draft produced one of the greatest busts in history, what have we learned about the science of picking a winner. The Ryan Leaf, Peyton

Manning decision is something that has cast a long shadow to 2014 and beyond. The Manning Leaf draft was a huge part of our research, what is certain and what is not is kind of the basis of why people love sports.

So as you can hear in the clip occasionally the numbers will lie in the other direction and are wrong, they are completely incorrect. The numbers all said that Ryan Leaf was going to be a sure thing, the next big quarterback that was going to save a franchise. Unlike Tom Brady, the world kicked back and he ended up being arguably the biggest bust in NFL history.

My question to you Chayce is what made him such a sure thing?

Leaf had everything Brady did not. He had a huge arm, he has been reported as being able to throw a ball 80 yards downfield without moving his feet. He was viewed as physically gifted and superior to every other quarterback coming out of college at that timeframe. Based on all of the stats both subjective and objective including the eye test that a lot of professionals use, he was a sure thing.

So Ajay what do you think the implications are for athletes now and athletes going forward with these physical tests and us wanting to quantify performance more and more.

Well this reminds of a philosopher by the name of Michael Foucault and his ideas of governmentality and biopower.

How do you figure that?

Well if you look at the definition of governmentality by Foucault, he states that the government or state has control over a populous. So basically there is an entity out there that controls the general population.
But Ajay, how does this relate to sport? There is no government or politics involved in athletics.

Yes, yes I understand that, but humor me.

Sure, sure, go ahead

Well I want you to imagine that the government or state in this scenario is the NFL, NHL, MLB, whatever professional league you want to use.
Okay I think I am starting to understand where you are going with this.
The most dominant way that the government or state gets the population to obey their rule is through laws and policies. Would you agree?

Yeah that's definitely one way that governments get people to conform. Now let's use the NFL in this example. In this scenario the NFL is the governing body or the government. The way it gets its athletes to conform, is through fitness measurement. Can you see what I'm getting at?

Let me give it a shot. So what you are saying is by conforming to pre-determined values, and exceeding these values or expectations it creates conformity across the league in that all athletes perform to a level expected by the NFL. But how does this relate to the concept of biopower?

So because there are predetermined values that all athletes must achieve to determine if they are good or not creates very polarizing sides. On one side we have the athletes that were not able to conform to the values, ie. Tom Brady. And on the other side we have athletes that met or exceeded these values, ie. Ryan Leaf. The athletes that reached these scores were slotted as superior to the rest, and often are picked early in the draft.

So what you're saying is fitness measurements give biopower to those who conform and can exceed expectations.
Yes, exactly. The definition of biopower is the ability to have power over other bodies, therefore an athlete that is slated as stronger or faster has this power.
So what are your final thoughts on all of this Ajay?

I believe that fitness testing and measurements will never cease, it does provide some sense of how an athlete will perform. But as we mentioned before, there are many other attributes that make a person who they are. I believe that fitness measurements also add to the drama of sport. For example, you go into a movie, you want to be surprised. Same thing with sports, and that's what fitness measurements do. We want to see athletes exceed expectations as well as be entertained and surprised. And as you mentioned before, there is a feedback loop to this abstraction. At my

cousin's basketball game on the weekend, I saw everyone dressed like Steph Curry. Steph is another example of an athlete that went against the abstraction of fitness measurements and proved everyone wrong that he could be one of the greatest shooters to ever play the game. I saw a bunch of kids that were jacking up three's and acting like Curry. Here is the feedback loop. It does affect lots of people around the circle. That is pretty much my take on it and how I view the abstraction of physical measurements on athletes. What about you?

I agree, I think measurements don't embody the athlete, I don't think measurements embody the person as a whole. I think there are subjective and objective measures as far as measurements go, and I also think there are qualitative and quantitative measures. There is the eye test as well as actual statistical measures. But there are also things that don't show up. Like are you willing to dive on the floor to get that loose ball, are you willing to put in that extra time in the gym before or after practice, are you willing to watch film? Going back to the NFL that is one area that under athletic quarterbacks attribute their success to is they study the game, they become students of the game, and that's not something you can quantify. The expected is not exciting, I completely agree with you in that regard, people want to be surprised and the entire purpose of sport is entertainment. It's an escape for a lot of people. Athletes and teams that kick back on the expectations set onto them are entertaining to watch, we want to see the teams and individuals have success that aren't supposed to have success. What I love about this topic is that is shows how the scientific method contributes to the abstraction of performance and potential. But also shows that the scientific method isn't always correct. There is always outliers, there is always the exception to the rule, and that is true with sport as well.

Maybe if they make a test that can determine what kind of heart you have maybe then these measurements will be more accurate?

You never know…

Thank you for listening to the Philosophy of Sport podcast, my name is Ajay, and my name is Chayce. Have yourselves a great weekend.

Just one final note, Ajay and I wanted to thank Ada Jaarsma and the rest of our philosophy 2267 class, we wouldn't have put this podcast together without you. So thank you.