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Poetic Meaning and Perspectives on Sport: Introducing Kinesiology Undergraduates to Mysticism

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Poetic Meaning and Perspectives on Sport: Introducing Kinesiology Undergraduates to Mysticism

Abstract

Mysticism in sport is a unique experience in which someone is engulfed by a feeling of existence both in real time and stopped time as well as entering a realm of unparalleled reality surrounded by mind and spirit (Higgs & Braswell, 2004). Despite the inexplicability of mystic experiences, poetry provides one means of deciphering them. The purpose of this article is to model how sport participants could be engaged in a process of self-reflective inquiry, then self-author scholarship that synthesizes and interprets the results of their self-reflection. During their 2021 Winter Quarter course on perspectives in physical activity, four undergraduate students were invited to create an original work of poetry on a sporting experience or set of experiences. Each author supplemented their poem with a reflection paragraph, which identified how their poems overcame limitations of "exact speech" to convey mystical qualities embedded in their sporting experience. Three styles of poems were produced: (a) acrostic, (b) haiku, and (c) free verse. Through the creative writing process, the four authors furthered their knowledge of winning and losing through sport, love and connection to sport, transcendent levels of play including the 'flow state', as well as furthering their understanding of mysticism and its unique relationship to personal experience. Analysis of the given poems revealed similarities in the emotions evoked, either as an athlete or as a spectator. Future directions would include exploration of other sport roles besides athletes and spectators, as well as the incorporation of additional artistic modalities besides poetry.



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Poetic Meaning and Perspectives on Sport: Introducing Kinesiology Undergraduates to Mysticism

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Abstract

One mystic view of sport is that it can provide a unique experience in which someone is engulfed by a feeling of existence both in real time and stopped time, as well as the sense of entering a realm of unparalleled reality surrounded by mind and spirit (Higgs & Braswell, 2004). Despite being difficult to fully convey, poetry provides one avenue to understand and convey mystic experiences in sport. The purpose of this article is to model how self-authored poetry could help students obtain a fuller understanding of mystic philosophy and ways it can be applied to identify and understand experiences in sport. During a 2021 Winter Quarter course focused on perspectives in physical activity, four undergraduate kinesiology students created an original work of autobiographic poetry on a sporting experience or set of experiences, which was supplemented with reflective writing focused on ways creating poetry helped them understand mystic philosophy. Three styles of poetry were produced: (a) acrostic, (b) haiku, and (c) quatrain. Through the creative writing process, the four authors furthered their knowledge of winning and losing through sport, love, and connection to sport, transcendent levels of play including the ‘flow state,’ and furthered their understanding of mysticism and its unique relationship to personal experience. Analysis of the given poems revealed similarities in the emotions evoked, either as an athlete or as a spectator. Future directions would include exploration of other sport roles besides athletes and spectators, as well as the incorporation of additional artistic modalities besides poetry.

Keywords

Art, kinesiology, philosophy, poetry, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), undergraduate research

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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With the advent of Internet technology and other modern advances, words are readily available to describe, explain, or interpret an idea, and yet there still exist ideas or experiences that are difficult to capture in literal terms. Perhaps this is because humans are deeply symbolic, and our expressions have divergent meanings shaped by context, relationships, and varying emotions. Yet even as we struggle to articulate our experiences, we still strive to understand ourselves and communicate who we are, often by defining ourselves through our relationships to others, our physical environments, global and local events, and prevailing ideas (including, ideals, goals, and principles). Describing the meaning in our daily lives can be a way to motivate ourselves or encourage others, to foster closure and acceptance of events and circumstances, or to convey simultaneous, but seemingly conflicting emotions like sadness and gratitude. Given how valuable and difficult it can be both to describe our experiences and locate meaning in them, this process requires a great deal of preparation, as Joel Kupperman argues in his textbook, *Classic Asian Philosophies: A Guide to the Essential Texts*; as a way to provide such preparation, Kupperman introduces the reader to mysticism (Kupperman, 2007a). Mysticism is a school of philosophy that assumes literal words would never be sufficient for describing, explaining, or interpreting deeply felt or intricate ideas about an experience (Kupperman, 2007a). One way to get around a reliance on literal terms is through artistry. Artistry requires preparation not just through learning techniques to compose or craft, but also through learning how to engage in imaginative thought, reflection, and meditation. Artistry allows the creator to craft meaning from special or significant experiences they have had, learned about, or aspire towards, which may include a sense of enlightenment or transformation. One common medium to mystical insight was through poetry, according to Kupperman (2007a) who first introduces mystic enlightenment in discussing medieval Islamic culture (circa 1230 CE). Like other art forms, poetry lacks a universal definition (Academy of American Poets, n.d.). Poetry has a myriad of forms it can take, making it conducive to connecting the creator and reader to the meaning of an experience, which literal words could never fully describe or even draw attention to (Flanagan, 2019). As a creative process, poetry is used to evoke emotions, provocative thoughts, and concisely expressed feelings to prompt the reader to immediately recognize relatable yet difficult to interpret concepts, which are presented as sensations, contrasts, or analogies to name a few modes of expression (Flanagan, 2019). Poetry can show the surreal aspects of a person's experience from the viewpoint of the speaker, and poetry allows the audience to be connected to the meaning of those experiences as the speaker understood them.

Given poetry's potential to connect readers with layers of meaning, it is promising to see researchers use this literary form to convey their findings (Delplanche et al., 2020). In kinesiology, for instance, researchers have used creative writing to transmute interview transcripts into stories (Kingsley et al., 2017) and into vignettes (Giffin et al., 2021) that vividly capture similarities and differences in how individuals perceived their experience in the sport domain. These have indeed shed light on how people's interpretations of their recurrent experiences in sport powerfully shape how they understand themselves and what sport means to them. A future direction for mystic inquiry in sport would be to mirror methods for autobiographic inquiry, whereby participants serve as the informants to, and researchers of, their experiences in and/or around sport.

Autobiographic inquiry is a process of self-study used to put the elements of one's life into perspective (e.g., trajectory, themes, significant events; Pasupathi et al., 2009). It is a multilayered act of introspection, whereby the composer considers how external factors and personal reactions, decisions, and behaviors may coalesce together to shape their personality and values, among other factors used to articulate a sense of self (Pasupathi et al., 2009). Research and creative inquiry focused on life stories could do more than reveal factors that shape self-identity in a given life domain. The findings/products could also promote understanding.

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Creative works mirroring autobiographic inquiry or introspection have focused on the social institution of sport. *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature* has published a number of creative works that showcase the way significant events and/or themes in sport impact personal identity. In the short essay “Lakota Rules,” Wétu Brings Water narrates—across the four quarters of a single high school basketball game she plays—the ways in which gender roles and economic hardship of living on a reservation have impacted her (Brown, 2020/2021). Wétu also tells of the joy and liberation she feels from playing basketball, as well as the rich friendship she has with her teammates, even if some family members disapprove of their friendship due to homophobia (Brown, 2020/2021). Similar work has been presented as poetry, as in Dave Nielsen’s poem, “Growing Up.” Creative writing can be a means through which a person examines and adds description to significant events or themes within their life story.

Pasupathi et al. (2009) state that, in effect, life stories are ongoing dialogues that people have with themselves (and possibly others). A mystic philosophy would see creative writing and other creative endeavors as a necessary process not only to foster deeper self-understanding, but also to construct embodied knowledge that would resonate with others (Smith, 2018). To paraphrase Kupperman (2007a), even if we lack a full sense of a person’s life story, we are not clueless to it either. In accordance with mystic philosophy, creative writing focused on significant events or themes embedded in one’s life story could foster a more integrated understanding of how those events or themes relate to self-identity. As the creative writing which we referenced and specific to sport suggests (Brown, 2020/2021; Nielsen, 2020/2021), the process of creating autobiographic poetry could aid a person in (re)interpreting the ways, and depth, in which significant events or themes in sport within their life story may relate to their sense of self (Szedlak et al., 2021).

Purpose. The purpose of this article is to report on one effort to teach undergraduate kinesiology students the tenets of mysticism using a process similar to the steps taken by Delplanche et al. (2020) to produce their found poems. In our case, however, the students were invited to construct poems based on their personal experience in sport, then reflect on how their poems may convey qualities about their personal experiences with sport in ways literal description could not. This activity fostered a fuller understanding of mysticism, promoted self-knowledge, and elicited several participants’ reinterpretation of how sport fits within their broader life stories.

Methods

Participants. Undergraduate students ($N = 25$) enrolled in one introductory course on perspectives in physical activity were invited to submit a work of original poetry about their experience(s) with sport. The completion of the activity was optional and worth extra credit in the course. The window for submission was nine days. The course occurred during the 2021 Winter Quarter (January-March) and took place at a 4-year university on the quarter system, located in the United States of America, and delivered in English. Students of diverse majors were enrolled in the course, with the majority (76%) being kinesiology majors who completed the course to satisfy requirements for their concentration. Several non-kinesiology students were enrolled in the course to satisfy requirements for a minor degree in exercise and sport studies. Further description of the course is found in the online university catalog (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, n.d.). Four kinesiology students independently completed the extra credit assignment and submitted work that satisfied all requirements of the assignment. After the course ended, the four students were invited by the course instructor to pursue peer-reviewed publications of their work. All students accepted the invitation, and they are the primary authors of this article.

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Assignment description. Each student chose a sport experience to base their poem on, and could select to articulate this experience from a variety of vantage points (e.g., as a fan, coach, athlete). Students were not restricted in the type of poem they could submit, nor the number of roles or settings incorporated into the poem. Furthermore, no definition of sport was provided, allowing students to interpret sport in a variety of ways. The vague instructions were appropriate for several reasons: (a) sport activity is defined differently in different countries, (b) a universal definition of sport does not exist, and (c) this activity was designed to promote unbounded creative inquiry, expression, and reflection using poetry. Upon completion of their poems, each student was tasked to generate a reflection paragraph about their poem. The purpose of the reflection was to analyze whether and how symbolism fostered through non-literal description/expression might reveal subtle, yet meaningful (i.e., mystical) insights about their experience in sport. Beyond inviting multiple means of expression and engagement, this assignment implemented a universal design for learning approaches through multiple means of representing the assignment and by providing tips and examples for completion (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018; Kennedy & Yun, 2019).

Theoretical assumptions. Like other domains of life, sport evokes certain emotions that prove difficult to explain due to their unique circumstances, as well as the varied nuances they tend to carry between two people experiencing the same event (Wann, 2006). One way to capture the mystical (i.e., subtle) emotions, perspectives, and sensations of an event or experience is through a unique and creative outlet. In Kupperman's section on mysticism, he explains that "mysticism is concerned with truths that cannot be fully captured in any literal language. Poetry and metaphor may be enlisted to say what the mystic wants to say" (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 64). Moreover, Kretchmar et al. (2017a) argue that the conventions of everyday life and cultural socializations – e.g., custom, education, language – prevent individuals from fully understanding the intangible elements of their lives (e.g., emotions, logical relationships, spiritual purpose, values). It is the intangibles, philosophers argue, that fundamentally shape a person's self-identify and interaction with their environment, and that simultaneously bind that person to others who are perceived as different (Kretchmar et al., 2017a). The structure of this assignment allowed for more in-depth analysis of the common experience of sport (PledgeSports.org, n.d.), using perspectives from the required course textbook by Joel Kupperman, *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to The Essential Texts* (2nd edition). Kupperman's take on mysticism was examined in the context of the authors' reflections about past experiences in sport. In doing so, the assignment was aligned with the phenomenological mode of descriptive inquiry, which is to get back in touch with one's past experiences and examine what it is those memories may mean exactly (Kretchmar & Torres, 2018). Adding reflection to the submission enabled students to comment on how the assignment helped them understand mysticism as a philosophy and ways it may apply to sport.

Results

The four student authors utilized a different style of poetry to express their thoughts and feelings evoked through sport. One author wrote an acrostic poem, in which the first letter of each line spells out a meaningful word. This is a powerful style of poetry as it emphasizes one key word or concept throughout the poem. Another author wrote a haiku, a poem that contains 3 lines with 5, 7, and 5 syllables, respectively. Haikus emphasize the idea that less is more, given both the specific rules and brevity of this form. The last two authors wrote two similar quatrain poems, using a rhyming scheme that rhymed every other line in stanzas of 4 lines. The rhyming poems cultivated dynamic cohesion between the lines of the poem, which helps the reader orient to the emotional

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tenor of the work, rising, falling, or building as the reader progresses through the poem. This alternating rhyme scheme binds the stanzas together in subtle ways, each linked more closely than if the rhyme scheme were omitted. Each poem is accompanied by a reflection paragraph from the student author.

Each student author demonstrated creative integration of course content to compose a reflection on their poem, having used select concepts from varied chapters in the required course textbook, Kupperman's *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to the Essential Texts* (2nd edition). The select concepts were used to describe and explain how their process to compose their poems helped them understand what mystical insight is and ways poetry can capture aspects of experience that literal terms could not. Consequently, the reader receives an opportunity to see what is familiar in a new light and with new implications. Finally, the student authors also took liberty to discuss briefly ways in which the assignment was valuable to them in terms of helping them understand mysticism philosophy and its applications to sport. Like Delplanche et al. (2020), each student author concludes their poem with a photograph. Beyond humanizing the author and their reflection, the photograph signals a mystical depth of experience only expressible through artistry.

Poem number 1

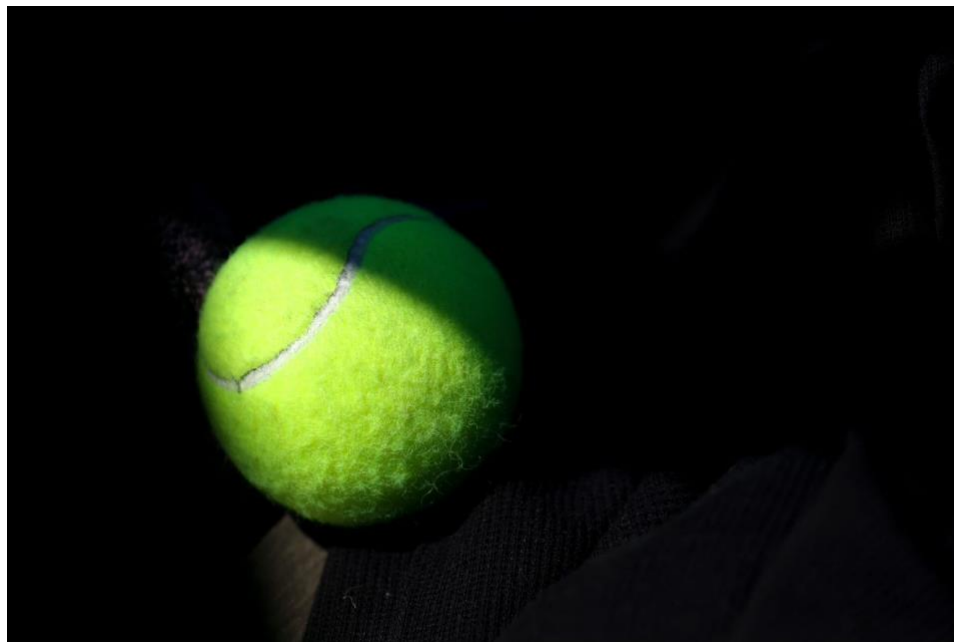
Endurance

An acrostic poem by Celene T. Balido

Entering the court, I look towards the net
Noise in the background fades to nothing
Drifting away from the rest of my team, the audience, the coaches
Under the hot sun, squinting my eyes in the heat
Racing towards the first sight of neon green
Air rushes on my face
Neering the ball, my body moves in unison instinctively
Calling out in triumph
Enduring all conditions

Figure 1

Visual Representation for “Endurance”



Note. The image is a photograph that depicts a green tennis ball in a car trunk surrounded by shadow; a beam of sunlight illuminates most of the visible surface of the ball.

This image represents the mystic idea of total absorption in sport, as the spotlight remains on the ball and the game while all external elements fade in the background.

The photograph is from Kyle Calzia (2021). Reprinted with permission.

Discussion of poem number 1

This poem touches on the *Bhagavad Gita* philosophy of “losing one’s self” in activity and letting all external factors fall away (Kupperman, 2007b, p. 48). According to the *Bhagavad Gita* approach to physical activity, when one is absorbed in their activity, they can let go of all other worries, outcomes, rewards, or consequences (Kupperman, 2007b). While in this intense state of concentration, athletes can reach spiritual enlightenment and an improved quality of life (Kupperman, 2007b).

Writing poetry facilitated my understanding of this experience, as I processed both the events of the tennis match as well as the sentiment of becoming fully engrossed in a competitive tennis match. Kupperman describes how “skilled sequential activities come close to total absorption, as someone becomes carried along with the activity and is at the same time abstracted from the character of her or his individual life” (Kupperman, 2007b, p. 49). The acrostic form of poetry

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allowed me to concisely reflect on my feelings and connect my personal experience in tennis to the concept of total absorption. Despite background noise, harsh weather, and an audience, I could still find a way to reach a state of flow by centering my attention onto the game and allowing myself to embrace the activity. Rather than worrying about the outcome of the match or the sun in my eyes, all I was focused on was the game that I love. This allowed external factors to fade away and for me to reach total absorption. Kupperman states that “the varieties of mysticism all place weight on experiences of an extraordinary sort [...] as revealing something important” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 61). Mysticism is apparent in the experience of total absorption, and this experience is extremely significant to athletes and all those who participate in skilled sequential activity. Through the construction of this poem, I reflected on the revelations of the extraordinary experience of reaching total absorption. As the poem touches upon, I found through writing this poem that endurance beyond external elements is what allows athletes to reach ‘the zone’ and perform to their best abilities.

Poem number 2

The Sports Fanatic

A haiku poem by Coburn A. Barbar

Fans invigorate,
As athletes thrill with prowess!
For love of the game!

Figure 2

Visual Representation of “The Sports Fanatic”



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Note. This photograph depicts a crowd at an indoor basketball court, just after a high school men's basketball game has ended. At the center is a player in a white and navy uniform, wearing the number 24.

This image captures the emotions that are expressed by fans and players after a thrilling victory against a rival school. One can see the excitement, unity, and passion for the sport and their team.

The photograph is from Kylie Barbar (2018). Reprinted with permission.

Discussion of poem number 2

This poem reveals the love and passion that athletes and fans, like me, have towards sports and physical activity. For sports fanatics, strong emotions, such as attraction, affinity, or love of the game, are expressed and can elicit unexplainable feelings. The displays of greatness during sport excite fans and players and highlight moments, such as game-winners or spectacular plays, are what exhilarate sports fanatics, as we have love and appreciation for the game(s). As a former athlete and huge sports fan, I can relate to this poem, and believe that many other sports fans will as well, as sports evoke certain passions and emotions. For example, sports unexplainably bring out competitiveness, fiery aggression, passion, love, and other traits in such a way that athletes and fans often lose ourselves in the game, as they strive for satisfaction or victory.

Reflecting on the effect of sport, through poetry, helped me better understand the philosophical teachings of mysticism. Kupperman first introduces the reader to mysticism in the context of Sufism (Sharma, 2021), which Kupperman explains to be an Islamic movement, comprised of philosophers and poets, who historically have emphasized “giving great weight to special experiences [that might have] concerned God and one’s own nature” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 61). According to Sufism, the connection, through passion and love, to people or activities outside of oneself helps one reach a divine state of being and contributes to a loss of self (Kupperman, 2007a). When athletes and fans learn to lose themselves in sports, we can become one with the sport or activity and move further towards a divine reality. In writing this haiku, I used careful word selection to express the excitement, energy, and strength that sport can provide. For example, the word “invigorate” is used to express the inexplainable feeling of strength and energy that shocks fans and athletes during highlight moments and game-changing plays. The philosophical considerations I applied in reflecting on my poem allowed me to further understand the effect that communion (i.e., an intimate sense of fellowship or rapport) can have on a person, especially in the realm of sport (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Sports fanatics’ love for the game and passion for the aspects of sport transcends the experience. Sport is no longer viewed as a game, but as an integral part of one’s life and an important part of one’s identity. As expressed by Kupperman, certain mystical experiences, such as sport, “inescapably lead to a change in one’s view of the world, and (if you accepted it) it would transform your view of your life” (Kupperman 2007a, p. 64). From this perspective, sport is more than just a game and changes one’s view of life.

Usually, in a Western society, the focus of sport is on the outcome: determining a winner and a loser (Kretchmar et al., 2017b). However, Sufism offers an interesting perspective that focuses on utilizing sport to lead to an internal loss of self and shift towards a divine state of being. Using this perspective, sport allows us to express ourselves and find our love and affection for the sport itself. Living in a Western society it is difficult to imagine sports without the competitive aspect and desire for victory, but Sufism offers a new perspective. Sport and physical activity should be

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appreciated for their own qualities, rather than focusing on exerting dominance through winning. An appreciation for prowess in sport and improving oneself through sport will help one become closer to enlightenment and to divine reality.

Poem number 3

The Beautiful Game

A quatrain poem by Mia I. Napolitano

Many players filled with joy,
As the referee blows the first whistle.
Both teams fight like kids over a toy,
Number 9 takes a shot as fast as a missile.

Now the score is one to zero,
My team becomes filled with anxiousness.
I hope I can score and be the hero,
And then pray to God with thankfulness.
I am so lucky to be able to play the game I love.
Soccer and I feel like the perfect combination,
Like Michael Jackson and his iconic glove.
As soon as I step on the field, I feel no hesitation.

I get the ball in a dangerous position,
And I look up to see the keeper.
I remember that scoring is my mission,
I shoot the ball and hope it's not a sleeper.
All of the sudden, the crowd cheers,
That's when I know my goal counts.
My team's excited and shifts to a new gear,
Whenever we get the ball, we are ready to pounce.

Another ball comes my way,
I shoot it in the back of the net,
Wow, Aren't I having a great day?
I leave the field with no regret.

Winning is always a great feeling,
But unfortunately not always realistic.
Losing is as if someone is stealing
A part of my soul and characteristic.

Soccer is not just a game,
It is my entire world.
Some say it should be of blame,
Since it places me in a dreamworld.
When I play soccer, I lose all sense of reality.

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It is as if I am on cloud nine.
When I come back to my senses, it is a pity
That the world we live in is not as divine.

Regardless of the game's outcome,
I always return to play,
To show everyone what I have become.
15 years ago to the day,
I fell in love for the first time
To a game that some call lame,
But for me it is a dime,
It's 'The Beautiful Game'.

Figure 3

Visual Representation of "The Beautiful Game"



Note. This photograph depicts a female high school soccer player on a green outdoor soccer field at night. She is wearing a purple uniform, black exercise leggings, and white goalie gloves, while holding a white soccer ball. She is walking towards the camera, but looking over her right shoulder.

This image captures Mia I. Napolitano playing the sport through which she has been able to experience a degree of mysticism which she describes in the poem above.

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The photograph is from, “Girls Varsity Soccer: Mia Napolitano (Photograph Number 12),” by Jason Weed (2018). Reprinted with permission.

Discussion of poem number 3

Although I began writing this poem for a class in high school, I never felt like it was finished. It was lacking something, but I never knew what. After learning about mysticism in an undergraduate course on physical activity perspectives, I realized that mystical insights and philosophies are exactly what was missing. After learning about them, I was able to add three stanzas, as well as edit the stanzas that I already had in order to display mystical insights. This truly brought the entire poem together and elevated it to a new level where it finally felt complete. After learning about mysticism, I was able to make edits to provide the reader with different sensations about how I feel while playing soccer and the various feelings and morals I have in relation to it. Additionally, it allows the reader to look into my experiences, rather than just focusing on their own experience.

In my poem, I talk about soccer and me being the perfect combination. Although soccer and I are distinguishable, I feel that at times we are one in the same. Mystically speaking, “to assert X is identical with Y is always to imply that they are distinguishable in some respects” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 64). This philosophical teaching allowed me to internalize and articulate how soccer and I can both be unique and identical. Additionally, I explain in my poem how soccer is my entire world. When playing soccer, I can have a whole other perspective and be in an alternate reality. Now, a lot of my world revolves around soccer and its values. Through poetry, mystical philosophies can “inescapably [lead] to a change in one’s view of the world, and (if you accepted it) it would transform your view of your life” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 64). Next, I reference feeling a divine sense that takes over when I play soccer. I have always felt a special and unique connection when playing. After learning about mystical philosophies, I realized that metaphoric descriptions were the only way I could truly express these feelings and connections that were hard to say in a literal sense. Kupperman explains “there is something in our natures that links us to God . . . these are things that are very hard to say in any literal-sounding way. They lend themselves to poetic or otherwise suggestive formulations” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 65-66). Finally, in my poem, I express my love for soccer. Kupperman states “being in love is one great human non-religious experience that provides a strong sense of another mind and personality, without entire knowledge” (Kupperman, 2007a, p. 66). After learning about this philosophy, I was finally able to understand why I felt these emotions and how I could explain them in my poetry. All things considered, the passages that I have explicated are just some examples of how I have been able to better understand mystical philosophies and teachings through writing my own poetry.

Poem number 4

Pacific Northwest

A quatrain poem by Jenner R. Sapienza

I’m with the Hawks that shake the core of the earth,
 I’m with the Dogs that out-compete their rival Cats.
 I’m with the skies that give us more than its rain’s worth,
 I’m with the Starbucks homework days and fireside coffee chit-chats.

I’m from the beasts of Brooks that fit our hooves,

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I'm from the Needle piercing the green-and-blue skyline.
I'm from Amazon one-day delivering and technology that improves,
I'm from the puddle-soaked streets smelling of pine.

I am the blustery evergreens populating the mountains,
I am the trails that crawl through the ravine.
I am the Sound that spits fish like a fountain,
I am the city that shines of pure emerald-green.

Figure 4

Visual Representation of the "Pacific Northwest"



Note. This photograph is a close-up focus of a pair of Brooks track spike racing shoe in yellow, blue, and black. The shoes face opposite directions, with the right shoe resting on top of the left, and sit on an artificial field of grass. In the background are a white transportable goal post for ball sports, trees, a mountain, and an overcast skyline.

Brooks racing shoes captured in a typical rainy Pacific Northwest landscape embedded with mysterious truths.

The photograph is from Jenner R. Sapienza (2016).
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Discussion of poem number 4

This poem that I wrote in the 11th grade speaks about the Pacific Northwest (PNW). Prominent non-sport elements are included such as the Space Needle, Amazon, and Starbucks. “The Hawks” refers to the Seahawks, “the Dogs” refers to the University of Washington Huskies, and “the beasts of Brooks” refers to the popular Brooks running shoe company. Brooks running shoes are uniquely fitting to the Pacific Northwest due to their specialization of shoe models to meet the region’s topographical demands, created by the ample tree roots, rocks, and streams. The first line references the Seahawks and their association with Marshawn Lynch’s “beast quakes.” The entire stadium would collectively erupt in a cheer eliciting a minor earthquake to rumble through the city of Seattle. Often, these minor quakes would even register on the Richter Scale signifying a significant earthquake. There is a level of mysticism in how the Seahawks are elevated by their fans to a level on-par with the gods of nature in the lore of many different cultures. The same can be said of “the Dogs” from the University of Washington. They clash with their rival “cats” from Washington State University in Pullman. I wrote about the “Hawks”, “Dogs”, and “Cats” to capture the elevation felt when the prominent figure-heads of the PNW clash. By illustrating them as titans duking their animosity out on the battlefield, I wanted to capture the unique feelings of spectatorship, as if one is on Mount Olympus watching Greek deities tussling. In the PNW, you are forced to choose a side. You are either a Washington State University Cougar or a University of Washington Husky. This fierce, black-and-white rivalry divides the PNW in half, but also brings the state together onto the same battlefield. I illustrate this as two titans clashing on the battlefield too. The first four lines of my poem, beginning with, “I am” capture the out-of-body experiences I feel through specific aspects of the PNW. Poetry allowed me to capture the feelings of almost *becoming* aspects of the PNW, such as the never-ending rain and grey skies, the smell of Starbucks coffee wafting through the air, or even the Seattle Seahawks, Washington State Cougars and University of Washington Huskies athletes. I also incorporate the elements of nature and the strong effect it has on the area and thus heavily influences the sports and activities that are performed in the Pacific Northwest. Brooks running shoes take full advantage of the area and the unique alterations needed to be most efficient. They are durable steeds that allow their stallion to trot through the ravines, roots, rocks, crevices and rushing streams that litter the area. They are the shoes of the Pacific Northwest gods. There is a strong spiritual connection in the Pacific Northwest with Mother Nature and the gods of nature. Other notable companies and sites that began in the PNW and hold a strong relationship with the area include Amazon, REI, Starbucks, as well as the Seattle Space Needle. These outdoor-based companies, the coffee of Starbucks, and Amazon packaging and delivery have all greatly shaped the PNW, as well as molded themselves around the PNW. There is a deep interconnection of environment, geography, and activities that are, and have been, shaped by the notable companies and figures of the PNW. As in chapter 4 of the Kupperman text, mysticism incorporates truths that prove difficult to capture in words. I attempted to capture some elements of mysticism in this poem, such as deity-level spectatorship and the feelings of forces greater than oneself, the out-of-body experiences felt in a meaningful area, and the deep interconnection of environment, geography, activities and corporations woven together. One must live in the Pacific Northwest to gravitate closer to these mystical truths and gain a fuller understanding.

Summary. All four poems function to both illustrate and further excavate individual emotions, perspectives, and sensations evoked by sport and exercise. The authors studied their lived experiences through their creative writing in a format that can be described as a phenomenological inquisition (Kretchmar & Torres, 2018). Poem 1 delves into the author’s novel experiences with the

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flow state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Poem 2 captures the deep feelings of love and connection to the sport on display. There exists a sense of immersive involvement, as the author felt they were gravitating towards the sport as a spectator for their team. Poem 3 reflects on personal feelings of winning, losing, and the sense of identity rooted in a beloved sport: soccer. Participation in soccer brought forth a deeper connection with God and a deeper sense of self-identity. Poem 4 explores the strong spiritual connection built over 18 years in the mystical Pacific Northwest, as well as a deeper sense of self-identity vis-à-vis an introspective assessment of these 18 years of lived experience.

Discussion

Sport creates emotional states that prove difficult to explain in precise ways due to their unique circumstances, as well as the varied nuances that exist between people experiencing similar events. One way to capture these mystical emotions and perceptions is through a unique and creative outlet (Kupperman, 2007a). The student authors of this article were asked to showcase their understanding of mysticism using works of original poetry, which were based on a sporting experience difficult to describe in a literal way. After completing the assignment, the authors learned that they each experienced unique feelings with the topic they chose; however, they all shared the commonality of using poetry as the method to describe the feelings they recalled within their autobiographic inquiry. Finally, the assignment served as an opportunity for the authors to answer their own questions about the mysticism seen or experienced in their lives. Relatedly, the activity provided the students with a creative and personalized outlet to further their understanding of the ideas that represent mystic philosophy.

The extra credit course assignment, which served as an optional learning activity on mysticism and the catalyst to the student-authored poetry in this article, gave each student unique opportunities to reflect upon their life stories in sport. Two of the authors pulled work from previous high school assignments. Digging into their archives presented the opportunity to reflect on past work. Unexamined insights of a mystical tinge existed within their previous work, despite a lack of intention to focus on them. The student authors realized that the thoughts and emotions embedded within their memories presented many shared mystical elements of experience. This realization was incredibly powerful for the authors. Moreover, this realization further led to the discovery that many of the mystical aspects alluded to in their poems were similar and acted as a shared undercurrent connecting their life stories to others. Despite each instance of the poems taking place separately from one another, the shared sense of tapping into flow states, losing oneself in their activity, and other difficult-to-describe emotions and perceptions all became common ground for the authors to reflect upon together. Pointing these motifs out through their reflective writing for the present article helped each student come to a fuller sense of ways mystic inquiry could be used in developing perspectives in sport. Similar to other modes of philosophic inquiry, mysticism provides a way for people to describe and understand the intangibles to existence, which if understood could help cultivate an appreciation in how a person differs from, and is similar to, others within and outside of sport (Kretchmar et al., 2017a). It is fitting here to refer back to Kupperman's observation: even if we lack a full sense of what a person's life story is like, we are not clueless to it either (2007a).

When exploring for deeper understanding of experience(s) in sport, a mystic approach paired with reflection reveals that poetry is an effective aid to autobiographic inquiry. Through these creative expressions of emotion and experience, similarities began to appear. In other words, the students used poetry to articulate sensations evoked by sport and central to their life stories, which may resonate with others not intimately familiar with the students' life stories (Smith, 2018). At least,

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this was the case for the four student authors, who completed their poems independently of one another. While subject matter varies throughout the present poems, there is a prevailing motif of sport evoking difficult to describe feelings among its participants. In the poems that took on the point of view of an athlete during a game (Poems 1 and 3), there are vivid descriptions of losing oneself in the game and letting the world fall away. In technical terms, the student authors write on reaching a state of flow and becoming completely immersed in their activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In the poems exploring the standpoint of sport spectators (Poems 2 and 4), the authors explore the unwavering connection between impassioned fans and their favorite teams. In this perspective, the sentiments accompanying fan identification take the shape of excitement and pride.

Future directions. This work of scholarship is not without limitations, which may serve as the basis of future teaching activities and scholarship. The suggestions that follow offer ideas for creative activity that may be added to the schedule of a course or sport program, to the benefit of participants and their wider community of supporters.

First, only two roles in the world of sport served as the protagonist viewpoint across the autobiographic poems: athlete or sports fan. Future projects that solicit self-reflection specific to other roles would enrich the scholarly discourse about lived experiences in the realm of sport. The reader of this article may immediately think of other relevant roles, including those of coach, referee, athletic trainer, and team captain. We could likewise consider the roles of parent/guardian, sibling/relative, and sport announcer. As individuals often wear multiple hats, the methods in this article could be used to aid individuals in creating a novel tapestry of their experiences in sport. Creating poetic description of experiences in two or more roles may generate new insights otherwise not observable through discrete forms of reflection (Misener, 2020). Hidden truths of harmony, contradiction, tension, and aspiration may be laid bare when mystic self-reflection is used across multiple roles held by a person (Morimoto, 2019). If applied to the generation of a professional philosophy, mystic self-reflection may uniquely complement the call for undergraduates to author an autobiography specific to their career aspirations (Oldridge et al., 2016).

Second, young adult undergraduate students served as the authors of the autobiographic poems examined in the present article. Autobiographic poetry composed by individuals at different life stages, such as adolescence, would be a fruitful line of future inquiry (Li et al., 2009). Moreover, there may be a paucity of scholarship focused on the sport experiences of individuals at different life stages and using a prospective design (Thomas et al., 2016). In a related vein, critical sociological paradigms may be used to guide the cultivation of poetry illustrative of how a person's life story intersects with prevailing societal forces that adversely affect wellbeing and opportunity (Cardinal 2016), to which sport settings are not immune (Massey & Whitley, 2021). The healing potential of mystic self-reflection using poetry is worth exploration (Delplanche et al., 2020; Hass-Cohen et al., 2018), given that injustice is pervasive in the lives of many individuals (Blackshear & Culp, 2021; Simon, 2020). Inviting sport participants to reflect on social truths that envelope their life stories may inspire civic engagement on the part of participants (Hessel, 2021). This may include the provision of social commentary akin to the collection of poems by former professional athlete, Ethan Thomas (2005), in his book titled, *More Than an Athlete*.

Finally, while poetry has many forms, it remains but one of many mediums of artistic expression. Future articles that report on the piloting of other artistic modalities would help deepen understanding of how artistic expression may be used to understand mysticism. Coupled with reflection, the activities could be employed to shed light on the process of using other creative activities to identify, and attempt to communicate, mystical insights in sport and other domains (Thomas et al., 2016). The inclusion of the instructional handout for an activity would aid in the

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replication of such work. Moreover, it may prove valuable in future work to solicit participants to reflect on specific experiential qualities that their artistry communicates (Cardinal & Thomas, 2016). Here are a few prompts that may suffice: (a) *What emotions are being evoked? In moments of success? In moments of failure?* (b) *What emotions are difficult to express verbally that are captured in your work?* (c) *Is there a common theme between these experiences and other aspects or events in your life?* (d) *What was your process like?* and (e) *Were there any challenges you experienced with using the artform as a way of communication?*

Conclusion

This article presented four works of original poetry, created by undergraduate kinesiology students in order to explore what mystical insights may lay beneath the surface of their life stories in sport. The supplemental reflections also conveyed how the activity aided students in understanding mysticism as a philosophy and how it may apply to sport. Accordingly, mysticism is getting in touch with the profound and difficult to describe aspects of existence, using figurative prose and symbolism to bring light and expression to subtle yet meaningful aspects of a person's life story (e.g., trajectory, themes, significant events; Pasupathi et al., 2009). Literal words could never fully capture these intangible elements of human existence, perception, or awareness, according to mystic philosophy, and the reflective writing of the student authors to this article confirmed this assumption. In this light, the aims of this article were achieved. First, the student authors acquired a new level of awareness as to the significance of sport in their lives. Second, the student authors developed a fuller understanding of mysticism and how it may apply to cultivate perspectives in sport. Finally, readers of their creative work were presented with enlightened views vis-à-vis the student authors' poetry and self-reflection. This article added further demonstration of the educational and scholarly value of including creative expression in kinesiology courses focused on autobiographic inquiry (Oldridge et al., 2016). Future directions were offered for building upon the mystic mode of student inquiry exemplified in this article.

Authors' Statement of Contributions

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Introduction: JDT, MIN, JRS

Methods: CAB, JDT

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Poem and reflection#1: CTB

Poem and reflection #2: CAB

Poem and reflection #3: MIN

Poem and reflection #4: JRS

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