

Goalball: Sport, Silence, and Spectatorship

mhelquist

Blog post published May 27, 2013 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/mx2kz-9d696>

Abstract

Editor's Note: Today, *SO!* kicks off our summer series on "Sound and Sport," an interrogation of the roles that sound and listening play in the interconnected aspects of many sports: athletic skill, spectatorial experience, laws of physics challenged and exploited, and politics expressed and created.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Article, Blindness, Disability Studies, Games/Gaming



Recommended citation

mhelquist. (2013, May 27). Goalball: Sport, Silence, and Spectatorship. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/mx2kz-9d696>

Copyright

Copyright © mhelquist 2013. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Editor's Note: Today, *SO!* kicks off our summer series on “Sound and Sport,” an interrogation of the roles that sound and listening play in the interconnected aspects of many sports: athletic skill, spectatorial experience, laws of physics challenged and exploited, and politics expressed and created. Often, the true play in sports involves power—and sound is a key venue to help us understand its flows and snags, and parse out the actual winners and losers. And, perhaps more directly than other venues, sports is a heightened arena that helps us understand just how important sound is in our everyday lives, even if (and especially because) we take it for granted.

One of my favorite personal “sports metaphors” for sounds’ unacknowledged centrality involves the precise 3.5 seconds I snowboarded with an iPod before I hit an ice patch full speed and had one of the worst falls I have suffered in my 15+ years of the sport. While I was laying on the hard packed snow gasping for breath and trying to piece together what happened, I realized exactly how much I depended on my listening to provide me with crucial, even-life saving, information. With my ears overwhelmed with treble-y punk, I had charged straight into an icepatch that I would have deftly avoided as soon as I heard the inevitable and unmistakeable scratching sound signalling its location. That kinesthetic lesson has continued to inform my everyday, every day since it happened and has led me to ever deeper understandings about sound’s power and the various forms of power that it clarifies—and are clarified by it in turn. I hope that this series will do the same for you, but without the blood and the bruises, even as some of our writers will remind you about the complex and dubious relationship sports can draw between “pain” and “gain.”

Batting first up on our line-up is **Melissa Helquist**, who describes how the Paralympic sport Goalball challenges the norms of the spectator/athlete relationship. Look for a post on Muhammad Ali in June (**Tara Betts**), skateboarding in July (**Josh Ottum**) and an all-out Olympic extravaganza in August, including a podcast discussing the sonic transformations of Brazil’s favelas in anticipation of the world’s ears in 2016 (**Andrea Medrado**). This summer, it is *Sounding Out!* FTW. —**J. Stoevers-Ackerman, Editor-in-Chief**

it's oh so quiet

it's oh so still

you're all alone

and so peaceful until

you ring the bell

bim bam

you shout and yell

hi ho ho

you broke the spell

–Bjork, “It’s Oh So Quiet”

During the London 2012 Olympics, the Copper Box venue, which hosted handball, was dubbed “the box that rocks.” The moniker was also, perhaps, a way to drum up interest in handball, a still obscure sport. And indeed, raucous spectators and the pulse and bounce of balls and shoes created a sonic spectacle.

[listen to ‘Hungarian and Danish fans giving it some at the handball’ on Audioboo](#)

When the Paralympics began a few weeks later, much was made of the transformation of “the box that rocks” into “[the box that rocks you to sleep](#).” The game that supposedly will rock you to sleep is Goalball.

[Goalball](#) is a 3-a-side game, played in two 12-minute halves. The offensive team rockets the ball down the court (it must be rolling by mid-court), trying to gain the low and wide net on the other side. As the ball rolls toward the net, the defending players lie on their sides in front of the net, blocking the ball with their bodies. As the ball is pummeled back and forth across the court, it jingles—a simple, clear bell emanating from eight holes in the ball’s surface. In this sport, sound is quite literally a game changer.



*Goalball team practice at the ParalympicsGB Training Camp, Image by Flickr User
The Department for Culture, Media and Sport*

All goalball players are blind or low vision and wear blackout eyeshades to equalize the playing field and to ensure that any residual vision doesn't get in the way of the gameplay's sound. A pre-game equipment check includes referees ensuring that eyeshades don't let in any light. Penalties include touching one's eyeshades or making noises that disrupt the other team's ability to hear the movement of the ball.

[listen to 'The Sounds of Goalball' on Audioboo](#)

Goalball, a game first invented as a way to rehabilitate soldiers blinded in WWII, has been a [Paralympic sport](#) since 1976. It is one of the few sports designed specifically for blind athletes, rather than adapted from an existing sport. It is a game of sound and touch, a contrast to the visual perception typically associated with team-based ball games. The game, like many others in the Paralympics, expands the sensory experience of sport. The court's borders are demarcated with tape-covered twine. Sonically, players orient themselves by calling out the position of the oncoming ball, rapping knuckles on the floor, and of course the jingle of the ball.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/goalball.mp3> **"Goalball" Courtesy of Perkins School for the Blind Archives**



Image by Flickr User The Department for Culture, Media and Sport

The game is high impact; at the Paralympic level, the ball is thrown at speeds up to 60mph. Players launch the ball with high-velocity spins, something like a cross between a discus throw and bowling. Defenders block the ball with their entire bodies—hands, feet, torso. The game is intense, but it is also quiet.

The players' reliance on sound demands new expectations of the audience. As spectators, we are watchers, but we are also noisemakers—shouters, shriekers, trashtalkers. Goalball spectators can (and do) cheer when a goal is scored, but when gameplay begins, silence is the rule. Before gameplay begins, referees demand, "Quiet Please!"

The Copper Box "was quite specifically designed to achieve a low background noise level so the blind athletes could play" ([Soundscape, Issue 3](#), 38), enabling the venue to be transformed into an atypical space for the sound of sport and spectatorship, a place to challenge our assumptions and expectations.

<https://vimeo.com/39003799>

Goalball? A description? from [Daphnee Denis](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Goalball spectatorship doesn't demand pure silence, but it is not the unfettered cacophony that we often expect in sports spectatorship. At the London 2012 Paralympics, Bjork's "It's So Quiet" was played during breaks in gameplay to remind spectators of their obligation. The song's ebb and flow of silence and exuberance captures the sonic rhythm of Goalball, its pulsing cadence of silent attention and energetic eruption.

<https://youtu.be/BF9TjbdJyUE>

The nickname, "the box that rocks you to sleep" captures the discomfort spectators may have with Goalball's soundscape. The silence during play is tense, but the scoring of a goal offers a sudden release. Spectators do not create a persistent cacophony, but rather a pulse, a constant pattern of lull and explosion. The silence of Goalball can feel disconcerting for spectators unfamiliar with the game. The sound of the crowd—the cheers, the clapping, the screams, the groans, the chants—often seem fundamental to the experience of sport.

Silent spectatorship, of course, is an expectation for other sporting events such as [golf](#) and [tennis](#). Here, the demand for silence is linked ostensibly to concentration, but also invokes questions of tradition, class, and (in the case of tennis) [gender](#). These sports are individualized demonstrations of skill, and we are admirers, observers.

Team sports invite identification from the crowd. We extend ourselves, making ourselves part of the team, often through sonic exuberance. Speaking about the crowd sounds of the London Olympics, Mike Goldsmith, author of [Discord](#), notes:

Individual athletes commented that the crowd sound was a great source of energy to then, but could also distract. Their comments suggested that some of them used the crowd sound as a resource, that they could tap into or not as the moment demanded ([Soundscape, Issue 3](#), 36).

Sound can feel like participation. Through sound, we make ourselves part of the game, cheering to support our team, hollering to distract a shot. Sound can make sport feel communal, and thus silence can feel like separation, a wall between spectator and team.

But the seeming silence of Goalball spectatorship offers an opportunity to pay attention to the sound of play, sounds that often get subsumed by the roar of the crowd. The meeting of disability and sport offers a “prime space to reread and rewrite culture’s makings” (Tanya Titchkosky, [Reading and Writing Disability Differently](#), 2007), a space to hear sport differently. The culture of sport is rife with ableist assumptions about how we move, how we watch, how we play. Even when sound is part of sport, it is often an afterthought, an addition—sound *might* be distracting, it *may* affect play, but the center sensory preoccupation of sport is frequently visual. We watch, we spectate, we keep our eye on the ball. Sport is sight, but it is also sound. Spectatorship is raucous, but it is also silent.

zing boom shhhh.

—

Featured Image, “Goal Ball” by Flickr User BLac

—

Melissa Helquist is an Associate Professor of English at Salt Lake Community College and a PhD Candidate in Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University. Her dissertation research focuses on digital literacy and blindness and explores the use of sound to read, write, and interpret images. She is a 2012-13 [HASTAC scholar](#) and the recipient of a [2012-2013 CCCC Research Initiative Grant](#). She lives in Salt Lake City, where she hikes, camps, and canoes with her husband and daughter.

—



REWIND! . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[Eye Candy: The Absence of the Female Voice in Sports Talk Radio](#)—Liana Silva

[The Plasticity of Listening: Deafness and Sound Studies](#)—Steph Ceraso

[Taking Me Out of the Ball Game: Advertising’s Acoustic Pitch](#)—Osvaldo Oyola