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# Three-sided football: DIY football and social transformationalism

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## ABSTRACT

Devised as an illustrative example of ‘triolectics’, Danish artist and philosopher Asger Jorn first conceived of three-sided football (3SF) in 1962 as a way to radically transform the world. However, 3SF remained a purely abstracted philosophical concept until 1994 when a group of anarchists, architects and artists decided to play the game for the first time. Since these early experiments, 3SF has been played and developed across the globe, from anti-racist football festivals in Germany, contemporary art installations in France, through to youth outreach programs in Colombia. Far beyond its emergent context, the game continues to resonate for a myriad of social actors in search of bottom-up ways to enact transformational change in contemporary culture. Drawing from forty-four semi-structured interviews with players, coaches, curators and activists, this paper provides the first ethnography into 3SF and privileges much needed perspectives into how ‘DIY Football’ initiatives are actively redefining individual and collective relationships to sport and politics in informal volunteer settings. Utilising the work of Bourdieu as a useful conceptual heuristic, it details how participants reflect upon, and negotiate, the challenges of reaching beyond the ‘doxic logics’ of binary competitive team sport. Moreover, how the democratic ‘desportised’ spaces of 3SF transcend quotidian sporting contexts and offer distinct forms of political renewal, social inclusion and practical education. This study further contends that the horizontalist non-hierarchical nature of the game develops critical consciousness and community leadership for those involved in the play.

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## Introduction

One hexagonal field of play, three teams, three goals, and one ball. Devised as an illustrative example of ‘triolectics’, Danish artist and philosopher Asger Jorn conceived of three-sided football (3SF) in 1962. Born in a time of Manichean ‘Cold War’ political oppositions, Jorn argued that a co-operative version of football – where players were encouraged to pass the ball to the opposition – would either stimulate a social transformation both on and off the pitch or simply end in a perpetual sporting stalemate. Either way, the team that conceded the least goals would be the victor. Despite such high minded intent, 3SF remained a purely abstracted philosophical concept until 1994 when a collective of activists, architects and artists decided to play the game for the first time at the Glasgow Anarchist Summer School. Since these early experiments, 3SF has been played and developed across the globe, from anti-racist football festivals in Germany, contemporary art installations in France,

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through to pedagogical youth outreach programs in Colombia and the United States (Collier, 2018). Far beyond its emergent context, the game continues to resonate for a myriad of social actors in search of radical, alternative, ways to enact transformational change in contemporary culture.

In the UK, following the games inclusion within activist protests against the London Olympics, the Luther Blissett Deptford League (LBDL) was defiantly established by a number of DIY 'political' football clubs in the summer of 2012. Over the next five seasons, several more 3SF teams emerged as an expanding playing community sought sanctuary from the hyper competition and hierarchical structures prevalent throughout the amateur two-sided game. Demonstrating a wider appetite for alternative (and more inclusive) forms of football, numerous volunteer-run experimental 3SF leagues and exhibition events have now been set up which regularly challenge the sporting orthodoxy. These various 3SF leagues and protest games have provided inclusive opportunities to play and develop a non-conformist, autonomous sporting practice, whilst also promoting specific political causes and highlighting social issues. Most notably, 3SF games have been held to show solidarity with Turkish political dissidents and Romanian workers in London.

It is within 3SF's recent popular diffusion that I entered the field as a player-researcher in 2017. Consequently, it is also where I firmly situate my research about the game. These directly lived experiences, alongside extensive interviews with fellow 3SF players, coaches, and activists, demonstrates how reaching beyond formal and institutional sporting settings can uncover a *samizdat* history of resistance and agency. Utilising the work of Bourdieu as a useful conceptual heuristic, the following paper details how participants reflect upon, and negotiate, the challenges rejecting the 'doxic logics' of competitive team sport and the 'commodification of everyday life' in DIY Football culture (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016). Moreover, how these politicised volunteer-run sporting spaces are informed by everyday material circumstances, but also possess the ability to transcend these quotidian contexts for those involved. In this regard, I argue that 3SF probes at the complex cultural meanings and ontological investments which are made to 'desportised' forms of football in contemporary culture. And further, that the game offers various forms of practical consciousness and transformative political resistance for players, coaches, volunteers and organisers alike.

### ***Social transformationalism and DIY football***

Since the establishment of the Premier League in 1992, football (in its formalised professional form) has been championed as a key export success of British business. Thus, it can be seen as a commodity form which is immersed within wider global flows of capital (Giulianotti, 1999; Goldblatt, 2014; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016). However, community activists, fans, and players have continued to nurture alternative contexts to experience a sport, which for many, has also lost a key part of its 'social use' as a node of local and civic identity (Cleland et al., 2018; Redhead, 2015). In this sense, football is currently experiencing a period of 'revolutionary' upheaval where social actors are actively questioning and defining what the sport means, how it is best practiced, and what its potential social use can be within society (Numerato, 2019).

Reflective of a wider social movement that rejects the trajectories of 'modern football' and the unregulated commercial excesses of the game, over the last two decades many volunteer-run organisations have taken up the baton passed down from the DIY ethos of the independent supporters trusts of the 1980s and 1990s (Duke, 1991; Haynes, 1995; Jary et al., 1991). Here, self-organised 'fan-activist' groups have founded 'phoenix' football clubs which they perceive represent their communities in more meaningful and tangible ways (Brown, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018; Canniford, Hill, & Millward, 2016; Porter, 2019). Given how these alternative club cultures offer a direct challenge to mainstream sporting practices, structures, and hierarchies, involvement in this DIY social movement 'becomes a site of political struggle over organisation, finance and representation' (Brown & Walsh, 2000, p. 92). Thus these nascent supporter movements and independently run club networks should be seen as highly politicised and reflexive volunteer spaces (Doidge, Burdsey, & Doidge 2018). These disparate initiatives have formed coherent and vocal

critiques against both the endemic corruption of the governing bodies of football and the exclusory nature of hierarchical competitive sport (Cleland, 2010; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018; Porter, 2019). They also offer the opportunity for social actors to actively participate in informal community run enterprises, and in turn realise small scale tangible change in society.

Kennedy and Kennedy (2016) place the recent emergence of 'grassroots football culture' along a continuum of 'DIY' counter-cultural activity, delineating between initiatives which are characterised by the values of 'social entrepreneurship' and 'social transformationalism'. Here, an important distinction is made between 'reformist' initiatives calling for more ethical financial practices and sustainability within existing institutions and football governance, and radical 'social transformationalist' initiatives who reject every aspect of commercialism, competition and commodification found within the modern game. Accordingly, DIY 'social transformationalism' offers a cultural space for social actors to build communal collective horizontalist organisations built on 'social harmony', 'self-determination' and 'self-government' (2016: 67). Within these underrepresented (and thus far under studied) transformational sporting settings, there is a thriving counter culture which empowers those involved to develop alternative models for organisation and to actively engage with social issues through volunteer-run community focused initiatives.

Existing scholarship about DIY social transformationalism in the UK focusses primarily on two club case studies, Bristol-based Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls FC, and the Leeds-based Republica Internationale FC. Ethnographies of Easton detail how 'Freedom through Football' initiatives developed within the club have led to significant transformational change through associated community outreach work, international football tours, and fundraising events (see McMahon & Simpson, 2012; Simpson, 2015, 2016). Republica (and its affiliated network of DIY political football clubs) have also been found to provide a 'practical education' of what 'socialist sport' can mean in the twenty-first century for players and coaches attempting to foster inclusive anti-racist sporting values within the hyper competitive atmosphere of local amateur football league structures (Totten, 2011; 2015). Crucially, these studies locate 'praxis' and forms of pedagogy within the day-to-day life of the club, where dogmatic political theory is confronted with, and augmented by, the necessary pragmatism involved in nurturing equitable social relations on the ground (Tucker, 2015).

DIY football (and its related antecedents) have long nurtured autonomous communities away from formal political, economic and sporting contexts. They undoubtedly demonstrate the power of direct action in instigating social change through alternative approaches to organising football. However, there remains an urgent need to further detail the intricacies and contradictions which constitute such alternatives. Also, to account for the plurality of voices who shape and sustain these initiatives. For Totten, volunteering and playing within DIY Football contexts 'is a process of education for those who participate ... it engenders a critical consciousness which is then acted upon as a form of critical praxis' (2011, p. 165). However, my research into 3SF seeks to understand how specific forms of 'education' are experienced by participants on their own terms. Also, what forms of 'critical consciousness' or transformative perspectives are engendered within these DIY community sport spaces.

### **DIY desportisation**

Studies into DIY Football must account for

the plurality of actors who form part of the critical mass that problematises the existing social order, the plurality of varyingly intertwined topics that form part of the activism agenda, as well as the plurality of tools used to problematise the existing social order. (Numerato, 2019, p. 157)

As such, there are a number of useful comparative studies into alternative football tournaments which foster inclusive cultural contexts for players and fans to come together around augmented sporting forms. In these DIY football settings (and in order to foster atmospheres of sporting

inclusion, political solidarity and anti-racism) teams may be randomised, rules, hierarchies and structures subverted, as the goals of football are re-oriented towards comradeship, reciprocity and fun (Kuhn, 2010; Totten, 2016). Identifying these socio-sporting spaces as liminal sites of 'radical possibility', Sterchele and Saint-Blancat identify that the horizontalist 'anti-structure' of DIY Football temporarily 'enables participants to experience bodily movements and technical moves as a pleasure per se rather than instrumentally oriented to the achievement of whatever goal' (2015, p. 118). Thus through the collective development (and insitution) of more inclusive forms of football, a transformational process of 'desportisation' has occurred.

Desportisation is an amorphous term which has been loosely applied within studies of a number of emergent sporting practices seeking to decentre competition, outcome orientation and aggression (Constantinou, 2010; Sanchez-Garcia & Malcolm, 2010; van Bottenburg & Vermeulen, 2011). Whether these alternative forms can still be considered 'sport', 'games', 'play', or 'Sport+', in their augmented state is something which has concerned wider scholarship (Rookwood & Palmer, 2011; Sterchele, 2011). However, it is succinctly defined by Green as 'the (deliberate) loosening of rationalised and boundary-making sports forms in favour of more playful and inclusive configurations' (Green, 1997, p. 37). Setting debates around sporting taxonomy aside, my research (with Bourdieu) explores how 'the deliberate loosening' found within desportised forms of 3SF marks a distinct philosophical and political position for those involved. In this sense, my research is a direct response to calls for specific analysis of the lasting effects and societal potential of desportised football in quotidian amateur contexts (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015).

### ***Bourdieu and body politic(s) in 3SF***

For Bourdieu,

the appearance of a new sport or a new way of practising an already established sport causes a restructuring of the space of sporting practices and a more or less complete redefinition of the meaning attached to the various practices. (1978, p. 362)

With this transformative proposition in body and mind, this paper critically considers how the 3SF community experience a radically 'desportised' game as one which actively breaks the habits and 'symbolic structures' of modern football practice. Also, how the reconfiguration of football within 3SF challenges the mental structures of players and their 'bodily dispositions'. This research further questions what new habits or perspectives are formed from not only from playing the game but also being participating in a volunteer led DIY anti-capitalist sports community. Moreover, how this participation is made sense of as a tangible form of political praxis and practical education.

In the constitution of a 'social field', Bourdieu rightly questions 'what are the mental structures through which social actors apprehend social worlds' (1997, p. 15). Pre-existing (and long established) competitive team sports and the normative spaces within which they occur (both mental and physical) can be therefore understood to have their own 'self-evident' logics of practice and particular world of norms, regulations and values. These 'doxic modalities' guide bodies through sporting spaces and give cultural meaning to the embodied actions therein. Following this contention, if we can define the social field of 3SF as a dynamic space where 'what is at stake, inter alia, is the monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practices and the legitimate function of sporting activity' (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 826), then the struggle over what constitutes a 'legitimate' form (or practice) of sport is also a politicised social arena within which 'struggles' or 'manoeuvres' take place (Jenkins, 1994, p. 84). As such, it remains imperative to analyse how players, organisers and coaches' experience 'social transformationalism' within 3SF both on and off the field. Also, what novel perspectives or understandings of the world are engendered through participation in these informal sporting contexts (Grenfell, 2010).

I believe that a *Bourdieuian* lens offers a useful heuristic to analyse the wider social field of DIY football as a site of embodied transformational politics, and it is one which shows how those directly

involved collectively produce alternative sporting spaces. A major limitation of existing literature about DIY Football (and its associated 'social transformationalism') is the failure to account for the plurality of embodied experiences, playing or otherwise. Therefore, my research into 3SF further contends that the body should not be dismissed as a 'passive locus of social relations' (Elden, 2007). Instead, that the engaged playing body, the intersubjective experiences of volunteers, and the cultural practice of 3SF itself, are each related 'semantic fields' to be understood and critically analysed as directly political, transformative, and educational (see Shilling, 2004).

Contra to a wider 'decorporealisation' (or abstraction of the body from space) in Western philosophy, spatial theorist, Lefebvre decried the Cartesian logic which has 'betrayed' 'abandoned' and 'denied' the body as a revolutionary political actor (1991, p. 407). As a consequence, his work sought to bring the body to the fore within analysis of transformational politics. Following this lineage, my research further aligns with scholarship which places the body as a 'site of resistance and active struggle' within the politics of social practice (Elden, 2004; Merrifield, 2000; Pile, 1996; Shields, 1998; Simonsen, 2005). Placed within this context, I argue that we should understand 3SF as a political site which transforms inter-related political and sporting desires into material action. This is a key consideration in developing new paradigms for analysis of 'social transformationalism' within both 3SF and the wider movement of DIY football. Acknowledging the centrality of the body in this sense shows how a diverse 3SF community – which includes those involved in youth outreach work in Bogota through to political protest matches in Istanbul – are involved in distinct (if liminal) forms of advocacy and community leadership.

## Methodology

My findings are based on ethnographic research conducted from August 2017 through to September 2020. It is important to disclose that I was an active member of the 3SF community prior to commencing fieldwork. I first joined the London 3SF community as a player in December 2016 and competed in the 2017 World Cup in Germany. Following this tournament, I was also appointed to the organising committee as the primary team liaison for the 2020 3SF World Cup: an event which was sadly postponed due to Covid-19.

During my time in the field, I played 3SF at various anarchist festivals, in abandoned industrial warehouses, a bullring in Madrid, a former Olympic athletics stadium, municipal parks in Edinburgh, Bologna and Prato, and as part of contemporary art exhibitions in Germany and the TATE Modern in London. This exposed me to the various contrasting contexts in which games of 3SF were being carried out. From 2017 to 2020, I was also actively involved in the day-to-day life of the 3SF community in South London. This included experiences of volunteering, including regularly helping set up the hexagonal pitches of play, moving equipment to and from storage, and liaising with other players and clubs. As a member of a prominent 3SF team, I was also interviewed for German and Lithuanian national television during this time, and pictures of me playing appeared in a number of European press articles about the game.

The ethnographic observations and field notes I gathered over the course of three and a half years were further complimented by 44 semi-structured interviews with players, organisers, coaches, curators and activists from across the globe. The largest sample group for my interviews were based in the UK and had attended, organised or participated in the LBDL since 2012, the more competitive and formalised Triball League since 2016, and the recent outlier artistic group who formed the Edinburgh Situationist Disunited Football League in 2016. This sample included a mix of veteran activists and artists drawn from long established 3SF teams alongside those from emergent 3SF clubs, where players have sought to bring the game to a wider demographic.

33 of the 44 interviewees in my sample identified as men, 8 as women, 1 as non-binary and 1 as a trans-woman. 5 of the sample identified as BAME or as a Person of Colour with the rest identifying as White or White Other. The nationalities of interviewees were majority (27 of 44) British. However,

they also consisted of participants from Poland, Turkey, France, Portugal, Germany, the United States of America, Colombia, Lithuania, Romania, Australia and Ireland. The age of interviewees ranged from 18 to 64.

3SF has been played by relatively few people over the course of its existence. However, far from an exhaustive survey of the field, I rely on a select sample that includes many of the key figures who have developed and played the game over the last 25 years. There is no guarantee that they are representative of the typical experiences of the game or the wider social field, although there were many thematic commonalities in participant responses which suggest validity to my findings (Maxwell, 1996). Further to this commonality, participants situated themselves (and others) broadly within an emergent political sport which aims to reach beyond wider societies defined by binary logics and commodified practices, and one which engenders liminal moments of political renewal and practical education. It should be noted however that there is significant and ongoing contestation within the community itself as to any singular unifying meaning and purpose of 3SF.

### ***Positionality and the politics of immersive research***

There is great value in having a cultural mediator who shares the fields of play with those under study. As Bourdieu and Wacquant argue, 'research should take place within a field in which the researcher is truly able to feel, understand and interpret the internal logic and practical beliefs of the inhabitants' (1992, p. 162). In this sense, I further align with scholarship that champions immersive and participatory research (see Morgan, 1993). However, the dual role of athlete and researcher is complex (Macphail, 2004). It enables access to a range of direct practical experiences and embodied perspectives about others, through which detailed and intricate analysis can be made. But it is also a methodological approach that runs the risk of an over-attachment to the research subject and towards assumptions of access to 'authentic' or 'legitimate' forms of knowledge (Manning, 2009; Pearson, 2009). As such, I acknowledge that there is no 'pure description' in ethnographic writing, nor one unaffected by the personal connections made in the field (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Different researchers will see and interpret the same things differently (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Erickson & Stull, 1998; Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002). By implicating myself within the field of study, I hope to at least contextualise the conclusions drawn from the project as a whole.

Sugden and Tomlinson cogently ask in reference to the immersive nature of investigative sociological research, how can we 'dig in the dirt and keep our hands clean?' (1999, p. 163). In this regard, I align with Oakley (1981), who suggests that so-called 'hygienic' methods of data collection mystify the idea of an objective researcher and alienate many participants and researchers from the research process itself. When we enter into sports communities as fellow participants 'there is no opting out of our relationships with and responsibilities to the sportspeople with whom we share the playing fields' (Bailey & Talbot, 2017, p. 13). As such, it was not possible (nor desirable) to maintain a façade of 'academic' objective distance in my work. In providing a survey of the social field of 3SF, I instead understood my role was 'to make sense of the actions and intentions of people as knowable agents ... and to attempt to make sense of their 'making sense' of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life' (Ley, 1988, p. 121). I therefore necessarily developed strong interpersonal relationships with my research group and continue to feel a responsibility to them in writing about their experiences.

Most academic research into sport is written by and about men. Therefore, a further concern for this research was negotiating the effect of my role as a white, heterosexual, male researcher and the consequences of this privileged, racialised and gendered position in the ultimate production of knowledge (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011; Dilorio, 1989; Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007; Messner, 1990; Wheaton, 2002). As part of this process, I utilised my contextual knowledge to reach out to specific members of the 3SF community (Stoll, 2013). In providing a platform for these subaltern

perspectives to be heard I hoped to mitigate some of the inherent bias within my findings which had the potential to relate an androcentric, hagiographical narrative about the game. Any distortions of the data collected through these approaches are entirely mine and I accept the risk that this entailed.

## Analysis & discussion

### *Football beyond the binary*

For many, sport (and its associated institutions) can provide an accessible and relatable way to nurture feelings of community, belonging and civic identity. Moreover, alternative sporting subcultures can further provide a focus for social actors attempting to transform their material social conditions and live more ethical and fulfilling lives outside of formal institutions (Wheaton, 2002). In this latter sense, for 36 of 44 participants, 3SF offered an accessible everyday context to deconstruct the binary nature of capitalist relations through sport. It was also defined as a political act that, for a majority (29 of 44), was a sport more representative of the 'complexity' of everyday social relations. Much like wider initiatives found within Kennedy and Kennedy's transformational paradigm, 3SF enabled players, coaches and organisers to express a unique form of solidarity with social causes and nurture anti-capitalist DIY volunteer spaces. The distinctions (and comparisons) made between 3SF and two-sided football further gave an anchor for participants to dismantle received values or cultural assumptions related to normative competitive team sports.

Chris framed the act of playing 3SF as both a critical stand against the divisive nature of capitalism and the fractious political climate in Germany.

3SF symbolises a break up of this binary thinking within society. When there is a third party you don't know what to do! Its not about winning or losing anymore ... its more about like having fun with people and cooperating with people ... Its more of a political act to say no to capitalism. Its not about survival of the fittest and making profits ... I don't care about that! We have to do something and three sided sport can be a good place to do that because it brings you together ... its something that people are searching for.

Indicative of a large number of responses, Mark also saw the collective desire to experience cooperative forms of sport in 3SF as a practical reaction to stark political divisions in UK society,

3SF is much more akin to the contestations of real life, you know this turning life into a black or white is what happens when people try and divide each other, to create an 'us and them' situation. Thats how so much of the world works, East vs. West, Conservative vs. Labour, Republican vs. Democrat ... so there is this constant separation in society.

Here, participation in 3SF provided a challenge to wider polarising binary discourses be they political, social, or sporting. The game was also a social practice through which participant's reflected upon how alternative forms of football could be utilised as a distinct form of political protest. 3SF explicitly dismantled the binaries of oppositional sport and its associated capitalist values of competition, professionalism and hierarchy. In this sense, involvement in the game created new paradigms for participation and inclusion. Key for players was that 3SF was voluntary and existed outside of the logics of capital and commodification.

Reflective of the free-form experimental nature of the game, common narratives of anti-capitalist resistance which emerged from the 3SF community were often augmented with more specific aims and objectives held by particular individuals, teams or organisations. These often varied considerably (even between participants within the same teams) and demonstrates how the disparate coalitions which constitute such alternative practices have to negotiate ongoing tensions between individual and collective political identities in the search for 'social harmony' outside of the 'commodification of everyday life' (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016).

In Edinburgh, the inclusive nature of the game was a key motivation for the playing community. Regular volunteer organiser and player, Ainslie thought that it was important to frame this emergent practice as 'beyond sport'.

How about don't view this as a sport ... because sport has too many negative connotations ... I want to expand the catch for people.

For Timothea, 3SF was a practice that defied existing sporting categories and was therefore a way to engage with recreation beyond that defined by hierarchy, competition and achievement. As she interjected in our group interview,

People are put off by the idea of sport ... I would never have fucking got into 3SF if I thought that what I was doing with youse in a park was a proper sport!

Equally for Robin, 'desportised' 3SF games in Edinburgh offered a pedagogical space to engage with football in a non-aggressive and non-competitive way. It allowed a way to participate in 'football' culture for the first time.

... it was more than just football, it was fun and chill, and it didn't matter that I was completely shit and couldn't really kick the ball. I was never allowed to play football at school because I was the wrong gender ... I never thought that football was for me until very recently ... because of like ... its very ... I always felt that it is just laddy and scary.

The way that 3SF confronted players and spectators who expected to see 'sport' practiced in a 'serious' and 'competitive' way motivated Robin to keep playing. However, it also resonated with other aspects of their life. Just as 3SF offered participants a chance to subvert and transform the arbitrary binary oppositions and doxic logics inherent to competitive team sports practice, it also actively challenged wider culturally constructed binaries and heteronormative gender stereotypes.

3SF is fucking with people's perceptions in that way ... perceptions of what sport should be, its really fucking brilliant. I love it ... I love it when I say I play 3SF, and then you have to have this big conversation. It's almost like to me ... as a queer person, really similar to being queer ... its queering football! I love that ... like really changing people's perceptions of something in that way ... saying 'this isn't going to behave as you thought it would. You can no longer dictate how this is gonna go!' ... I've disrupted your way of thinking, and that is really satisfying. I've got really used to that as a non-binary person and I really relish it!

Aside from the apparent pleasure taken in 'queering football', Robin's words highlight the complex meanings which are invested into the organisation of 3SF games. In explaining the game to others they were asserting and embodying a wider political 'queer' identity, one that rejected singular conceptions of sport and the body. In this sense, participation in the 3SF community transformed relationships to sport and to empower people to actively confront the norms of gender binaries. Here we can identify significant forms of community leadership in attempting to foster inclusive sporting spaces through the game.

In South London, promoting 3SF as an 'inclusive' sporting space that 'queered football' also resonated with Juliet, a trans-women who played regularly between 2016 and 2018. She saw participation in 3SF as a compelling way of challenging gender norms and sporting logics.

3SF intersects with the LGBT stuff because again if you are deviating from like psychological norms, sport doesn't have that much time for you ... 3SF is this space of ambiguity, ambivalence, doubt, and tentativeness, of not knowing what you are going to find until you find it. You know, this contrasts with sport, and particularly football ... which relies on this unimpeachable self-confidence.

As Eng suggests 'the concepts of queer and queering are useful analytical tools for interrogating hegemonic and powerful laws about how we act and speak' (2006, p. 67). In this regard, participation in self-organised and desportised forms of 3SF should be seen as a transformative act. Moreover, one which interrogates the hegemonic symbolic structures and values which frame and limit how players are able to interact on normative two sided football fields. The structural exclusion (and what Bourdieu calls the symbolic forms of 'masculine domination') which has long been identified within binary competitive team sports practice cannot be undone through purely rhetorical means (2002). As such, 'simply deconstructing our discourse about binary categories does not necessarily challenge the material basis of master categories to which subordinate categories of

people stand in binary opposition' (Dworkin & Messner, 2002, p. 25). Therefore, expressions of inclusivity or cursory displays of solidarity by participants involved in 3SF were not sufficient. The main driver for the 3SF community was to create and collectively nurture spaces of inclusion through voluntary forms of direct action. Here we can uncover the unique strengths found within informal sporting volunteer contexts where social actors can shape the content, form and trajectory of such DIY initiatives.

### *Praxis and political renewal*

Another prominent theme that emerged from my research sample was the sense of possibility and political renewal engendered through 3SF. Indicative of such responses, Fabian explained how playing 3SF was both a refusal to 'play by the rules' of received sporting and political discourses. He described how the first 3SF games were collectively developed in the wake of a number of demoralising political defeats for UK anarchist groups during the early 1990s.

I realised that a very kind of linear, logically defined approach to politics didn't work. ... so again it was like through three-sided football that I started finding the revolution again. I started to find a new relation to this way of thinking – not trapped in 'politics'!

Reflecting on her first experiences playing the game over 20 years later, Laura also argued that 3SF was demonstrative of importance of DIY 'self-organising principles'. For her, the game engendered new perspectives about the wider political landscape and how best to reach beyond social norms and behaviours collectively.

It was very interesting how we all let go of anything that is conventional and real and got into this space of political imagination ... like on the spot ... community, solidarity and just human interaction that you don't really get through conventional human interaction, at work or whatever ... not even with your friends ... there is always a layer of society put upon you and I think play manages to put that aside. Three sided football is a tool for that ... it makes you think differently.

Similarly, Lutz, a veteran goalkeeper who first played 3SF in Turkey in 2013, related how the counter intuitive mechanics of the game necessarily engendered critical approaches to the world for players and spectators alike.

You have to switch some neutrons in your mind and this takes quite a while ... I see it as a way to teach something to people like, OK, let's try something new. It doesn't have to be the way it is ... Once you understand how 3SF works, it can lead to the point that in real life ... that you are starting to think anew about other things as well.

This further resonated with Francis, who described the transformational 'politics' they encountered on the field of play in 3SF as a tangible form of agency.

It's not people trying to make up ideas about things that don't need to be discussed! In 'three-way football' you actually see it in motion and it is obvious!

Although participants framed organising and playing 3SF games in a variety of contrasting ways, in its collective realisation, 3SF offered the chance to transform politics from abstract conjecture towards a lived social practice, one experienced through the body and in material space. The game therefore can be understood as a creative spatial strategy for players and organisers to test out new forms of politics and collective identity. As Slabina argues, the playground can be a 'semi bound' and 'socially legitimate space' to 'bring abstractions onto the flesh of the world, as well as to explore the texture wherein human experiences occur' (2014, p. 122). In this regard, the sense of 'grounded playfulness' within 3SF acted as a refusal to conform within institutional structures or received cultural logics relating to sporting practice and organisation. 3SF enabled those involved to establish new forms of activism and sport in the face of a

perceived lack of viable alternatives. Moreover, the liminal embodied feelings experienced in games of 3SF were a way to 'let go' and enter into a space of political imagination, transformation and collective improvisation. In what Huizinga would describe as 'stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own' (1955, p. 27), the game became a liminal space where participants were freed from the constraints and strictures of everyday life. Here, many players felt able to nurture a sense of solidarity through a collectively developed form of despoised football.

### **Autonomy and agency**

What tangible and lasting transformational change (if any) has been engendered through 3SF will be dealt with in due course. However, the moments of agency found in those who are empowered enough to imagine and aspire to create solutions to material problems should not be discounted. As Zirin reminds us,

sports are more than just a sounding board for war, graft, and mind-numbing moralism. They can also be a place of inspiration that doesn't transcend the political but becomes the political ... Politics are remote and alien to the vast majority of people but the playing field is where we can project our every thought, hope, and fear. (2008, p. 144)

In this sense, 3SF enabled players to rethink their relationship to football and to project a better world in the process. It allowed participants to practically translate latent desires for political and sporting transformation into action.

For 30 of 44 participants interviewed, 3SF was more than simply an alternative to 'modern' football. It was a self-organised and 'democratic' space which acted as a tangible way to build forms of connection with people, politics and place. Throughout interviews wider 'anti-capitalist' sentiments were interwoven with participant's reflections on how best to realise practical solutions to social problems. The 'small-scale' and participatory nature of organising matches, the emergent political club identities and the ability to shape the form of the game (which is yet to adopt universal rules or codes of play) were demonstrable of a wider ability to instigate transformational change in everyday life.

Demonstrative of the ways in which the game empowered those disenfranchised from mainstream institutional settings, Richard described how he was no longer active in 'politics' prior to his involvement in 3SF. However, he found that volunteering in the 3SF community in London showed him that a new form of 'democratic football' could be developed collectively.

The thing that first brought me there was that we had our own thing that we can create, because we have our own ideals. Just because we love football doesn't mean we need to be complicit in the larger evils of it! We can re-purpose it for ourselves!

This tallied with Owen, who saw 3SF as a 'blank canvas' to nurture a more equitable 'football' outside of pre-existing sporting institutions and governing bodies.

Because we are starting at the start, we get to decide how three-sided is governed, or what it is for ... not what football is, but what it can do ... In two sided if you want to get past a certain point eventually you have to, you know, work with the FA or FIFA or UEFA and I think they are all just too far gone ... they are capitalist, neo-liberal, all that stuff. I like the idea of providing an alternative ... I guess, I mean I want to show that you can do these things without commercial interests. Without having capitalism getting its grubby hands on our beautiful sport.

For many, organising 3SF was a form of resistance imbued with a communitarianism and a DIY self-organised sensibility. Being involved in this 3SF community was also an acknowledgment that mainstream sport was in need of new trajectories, structures and more participatory membership. Notably, Alex found the most tangible impact of the game was that it practically demonstrated that alternative ways to live, organise and play, were attainable in the here and now. This is another key part of the transformational potential of the game.

You know 3SF is a suck it and see kind of thing ... you are able to try it on this level and to have a go at it and see where it goes. Maybe on a societal or political level its much more difficult to see those changes. What this (3SF) does is show us that actually at a ground level we can start making changes that will actually show us how things work. It is a bit like saying if we devolve things to a certain level and show that it works in this microcosm then maybe we can think about it elsewhere.

### ***Lasting social transformationalism, impact and pedagogy***

3SF is a sport that offers liminal, transitory moments to transform individual and collective relationships to physical culture, politics and wider society. However, assessing the quantifiable lasting impacts which surround such desportised events remain difficult to locate and analyse. It is imperative to critically consider how idealised notions of DIY community, social transformationalism, and social inclusion are frequently mobilised in reference to the game. In this sense, we should understand that the utopianism which characterises many responses emerging from within the 3SF community does not necessarily guarantee or lead to concrete social changes or robust cultures of sporting inclusion. Equally, we need to consider carefully that although narratives of political liberation and social transformation are alluring for those seeking wider societal changes, without tangible signifiers of any long term impacts how can we truly describe them as 'transformational'? In this regard, within the 3SF community a number of coaches have also recently sought to nurture lasting change through pedagogical iterations of the game. This is one site through which quantifiable impacts may be measured in future studies about 3SF.

Although the experiences of students within these contexts remained beyond the scope of my study, the reflections of coaches and educational practitioners who have thus far utilised 3SF in coaching sessions and classrooms (7 of 44 within my sample), suggest that 3SF has the ability to practically challenge student passivity, nurture communication, and to develop emotional intelligence for young players. Indicative of the myriad ways in which 3SF has had a tangible transformative effect on individuals lives, Ben trained and qualified as an FA and UEFA accredited football coach in 2015 after being inspired to spread the game to a wider demographic. Over the last two years he has run coaching sessions based on principles of 3SF across South-East England.

As a coaching tool it teaches players how to cooperate with other people and how to be creative with space ... 3SF is very much a component, a sense of 'completed football ideology' that I use in my sessions ... Yeah its a fundamental part of how I run my sessions now!

Pete worked as a coach and outreach worker for a prominent football education charity based in London when they joined the nascent Triball 3SF League in 2017. They also explained how 3SF formed the useful basis for reflective classroom-based sessions as well as a practical constraints-based training device.

The great thing about 3SF is that you can't just play it and not think about why or how it works ... One way or another students come away with a different concept than they started off with and thats cool ... it forces them to think!

For Miguel, offering students a chance to play cooperative three team sport (through the institution of 3SF games with his current Year 6 class) was key to his own critical approach to primary school teaching in London. He believed 'actively' promoting alternative sporting practices was vital to provoke and stimulate discussion with young people about the world around them.

3SF challenges them to consider what their role is within the game that they are playing. So I'm a teacher right, so I hate passivity. It is like a marvellous trick that capitalism has pulled, that idea of passivity is so much what you fight against as a teacher in various ways ... (3SF) actually questions the structures that they have inherited. It acknowledges a wider range of people ... and goes beyond the competitive element whilst incorporating aspects of emotional intelligence. So its a nice contrast!

It was not just in the UK that 3SF has been utilised in coaching contexts. Alabama-based soccer coach and referee Jon, devised the sport of 'Tritball' in 2016 based on Jorn's thought experiment (and an associated FIFA affiliated 3SF video). He has since used games to help develop youth player's communication skills. For him, the game offered a unique way to develop self-confidence in a less pressurised or competitive sporting environment in Elmore County.

That's one of the reasons I introduced it to our region because some of our U14 teams are having a hard time with communication, and in three-sided soccer it's a must! If you don't have communication then you're not going to do very well ... just to show the kids that communication is important and if they can communicate with an opposing team then they could take that into other settings ... Yeah ... I think that's what the kids liked about it, that they could be more wide open and expressive than they normally are with 'traditional' soccer.

What is significant about the above responses are the multiple ways in which 3SF becomes another distinct form of political praxis when 'loosened', instrumentalised, and rationalised in coaching and educational contexts. Here, 3SF has become a transformative pedagogical tool within the everyday context of the classroom and where teachers also operate as community leaders. Consequently, the game (and its trilectic message) has reached an unlikely but receptive wider audience and may yet produce lasting and wide reaching social change as a formalised pedagogical tool.

## Conclusions

Through the seemingly simple act of kicking a ball, 'human beings enter into a complex dialogue with each other and with the environment' (Eichberg, 1998, p. 162). In my analysis of such 'complex dialogues' within 3SF, the divergent political meanings and social investments ascribed to the game show the distinct forms of individual and collective agency found within the social fields of DIY Football. This paper has shown how 3SF allows participants to confront the doxic logics of competitive football and to actively take a stand against the exclusory nature of competition, commodification and binaries within wider culture. If as Ennis suggests, sport provides an 'institution of release' and 'a meta-social interpretation of the complexity of social reality in a relatively comprehensible manner' (2010: 33), then it is telling how 3SF provides an outlet as a 'meta-social' tool to educate, to organise collectively, and to realise a sense of agency, inclusion and direct political praxis in everyday life.

I contend that through analysis of the lived spaces of 3SF, and the embodied perspectives of those involved, we can identify a fervent DIY community which has been empowered to 'redraw the map of the possible', and is one that has realised 'new models of human association' outside of formal structures and institutions (Unger, 1987, p. 360). In this sense, volunteering time and energy within this emergent cultural practice shows the potential of alternative sports to act as a node through which to challenge societal norms and boundaries. However, we should be wary of a purely positivist analysis of 3SF. How 3SF is able to nurture various forms of social transformation (both lasting and liminal) is manifold but quixotic. My analysis remains limited by the occlusion of quantifiable outcomes. As such, 3SF may only demonstrate the potential for DIY 'desportised' football to act as a pre-figurative site of social, political and sporting transformation. Without long term commitment, care and dedication, Jorn's radical experiment will not provide the tangible and lasting revolution of everyday life he envisioned for those intent on playing this unique form of trilectic football.

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