

# Rolling With the Punches: A Conversation About Sport Ethnography

by

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## S U M M A R Y

This article presents a conversation between three researchers employing ethnographic methods in sport clubs about their work and the complexities of conducting fieldwork. The context and experiences of these researchers have been diverse in terms of sport (basketball, football, and boxing), location (the UK and Gozo, Malta), duration, and level of participation. In their discussion, they explore similarities between their work as two sport anthropologists and one sport geographer conducting ethnographic research in sport clubs in an island context. Formatted to alternate between excerpts of their conversation and brief interludes, this commentary first briefly sets the scene by introducing the ethnographic study of sport in anthropology and geography. The authors then discuss their different studies, before providing reflections about their positionality and access to the field, as well as who might benefit from research in sport clubs. This commentary emplaces the larger discussion about ethnographic research ethics into the concrete reality of sport clubs, allowing readers to feel what it means to be in the shoes of a sport ethnographer and to get a sense of the importance of ethics shaped and reflected through place, proximity, relationships, and power. By sharing their different experiences and perspectives, the authors intend to inspire yet another dialogue for fellow sport ethnographers and people engaging in applied anthropology in both academic and non-academic environments.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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## Introduction: The Rules of the Game

Ethnography is a research methodology used to capture data about the field site and population of interest. Ethnographers participate directly in the space to gain and articulate a rich insider's (emic) perspective of the dynamics occurring around them. The method has a long tradition within anthropology as well as geography as it was initially used to document knowledge about 'the Other,' fixing the idea of a global hierarchy by establishing the European colonial researcher at the top alongside European knowledge as the norm. However, contemporary ethnographers actively seek to dismantle this colonial tradition by combatting extracting, one-sided relationships, with ever more participatory and reflexive methods as well as basing research on reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the field.

The ethnographic study of sport by anthropologists has a long history with notable early works from Malinowski (1918) and later Geertz (1973) among others. It remained a relatively niche subject matter in the discipline for most of the 20th century (Sands 2002). However, over the last three decades, the growth of sport in all levels of local and global society has attracted greater use of ethnographic methods to analyze these practices and their contested meanings (Beisner et al. 2018; Sands 2002), especially as a way to talk about varying scales of societal change taking place (Beisner et al. 2018; Maguire 2000). Since its beginnings, anthropology as a field and ethnography as a practice have come a long way conceptually and methodologically. Chief among these developments for the purposes of this discussion is the role of reflection for researchers attempting to use these methods (Bourdieu 2006; Scholte 1972). Practicing reflexivity is a way to validate data and ensure its quality while paying attention to the fields of power and social positions the researcher and research occupy (Scholte 1972).

Geographers also commonly employ ethnographic methods in their research. Place-based sport geography studies the relationship between sport and place by exploring how sport shapes and is shaped by the geographic locations in which it occurs (Bale and Trudo 2008; Hughson 2009). Specifically, place-based sport geography examines the cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sport in relation to geographical spaces. Common subthemes include identity, economies, spatiality, and intersecting social and power hierarchies.

## How we play

With such a broad range of perspectives and topics within sport, the first question is how we work and relate our research to this emerging field of interest.

**Jacob:** My research is about sport clubs in Gozo, Malta, and how they build and maintain sporting communities through the club within the context of EU and national state policies around sport. I am focusing on two clubs. In one of them, I have been playing basketball with the older members since I first came here in 2018. I play casual recreational games hosted by the club and I am a member of their new, organized team that practices every week and competes with other amateur teams on the main island of Malta. This is where most of my fieldwork has taken place. Additional fieldwork is made up of interviews and conversations with the director of another athletics club on Gozo. His club focuses on increasing youth girls' participation in athletics. Gozo, the island I work on, is very small. There are not many resources to go around, and it has gone through extensive economic and political changes over the last few decades. So, I look at these two sport clubs, the people who run them, and what their strategies are for sustainable growth within these wider contexts. I also rely on my active participation and experiences within the club and with the other members to get insight into what type of space is being created within this context. I am interested in how broader national goals filter down and what that looks like for the people involved at the local level.

**Solinda:** If I speak about my research, it is very different. The club where I did my research has a solid infrastructure; they are professional fighters. That means, the gym is transitioning from a fighter's gym that only catered to fighters to a more family-oriented gym with kids' classes and an increasing membership of women and men being there for fitness purposes. I was in the martial arts space for 18 months every day. I did mostly Muay Thai and kickboxing. I started with the idea of examining how I am opposing my own body (female, Black, able-bodied foreigner) to the hegemony (White, British masculinity), and then see what actually happens. Later, I shifted from autoethnography to focus on an ethnography centering the members and the place itself. I am looking at how these encounters are entangled with race, class, and gender, and what such a space does within a multicultural city, as Leicester is called.

**Emily:** In 2022, with the “Off the Beaten Track” cultural anthropology field school, I started studying football clubs in Gozo, the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago. Gozo has its own football association, which has 14 different teams separate from the Malta Football Association. What I was really interested in is why there are so many formally organized football teams on such a small island. Nearly every village has a team, and some villages have more than one, so I wanted to know what this phenomenon was. What does it mean to the people who are a part of it? What does it mean to the broader community? I have been looking at how football clubs in Gozo create a sense of community, form a collective identity, and provide opportunities for social collaboration and village pride. Players and club volunteers share a love of football that propels them to participate for little to no pay. Some people retire from formally playing football and instead volunteer or work for their local club. Football is a family affair for many; people share that their fathers, brothers, and friends play or work for the club. These football clubs serve as a place for people to gather. People go and watch home team games or international games on the TV at the clubhouse. It is an opportunity for people to come together in a third space and have a shared topic of conversation and things to celebrate together.

### **Relationality: Where are we playing?**

Massey (2005) argued against the idea of places as bounded, static entities, instead suggesting that places are defined by the multiple social relations that intersect within them. Whereas traditional notions of place would portray a sport club on an island as a fixed and bounded geographic location with specific physical attributes, relational views of place allow us to emphasize their dynamic nature. Clubs and their contexts are relational places, constructed through relationships, interactions, and connections extending beyond their immediate, physical boundaries. Thus, they are “meeting points” of global and local processes, making them dynamic and open.

In our conversation, we touched upon examples of how places are relational in our respective research. Specifically, we discussed where these relational influences are visible. How does it affect the local practices? Where does the local context influence the available physical spaces? And how do members then make these spaces theirs?

Both the football clubs and the boxing gym are established with their own physical spaces. Hence, the community has a fixed physical space that relates to their sense of belonging. However, the basketball court is an active place-making practice that must happen before every practice or game as Jacob explains:

**Jacob:** It is the members of the club who set up the court before you can play and who get the equipment out and run the sessions. They typically rent the facilities, and this lack of a fixed location is common in the sport clubs that I have been around. They do not have their own fields or courts here, and they do not have much money to invest in them. Clubs are run by people with the necessary resources and dedication. Here this means individuals with an athletics background who happen to have traveled abroad at the right time to bring back knowledge and passion about a specific sport, and who work the right jobs to have the free time and connections to run a club in their communities. But in order for them to run a club, they need funding from Sports Malta, one of the central government organizations where funds for athletics come from. Sports Malta can get money to fund clubs through the EU if they meet certain criteria. Obviously, I am oversimplifying things, but it is just an example of the unique nature of the local context within a globalizing force like sport development. This creates a paradox between the local goal of having community-based sport clubs and national-Maltese and supranational-EU parameters defining the funding landscape. For example, to receive government funding the clubs need to show their alignment with specific priorities, such as increased female participation or professionalization of the area. This pushes the clubs to hire coaches rather than using volunteers. Other examples are that they have to show an ability to bring “a return on investment,” and that they have to travel to compete abroad for recognition and opportunities. Since these are such young organizations, they rely enormously on the members of the club to run things and get people involved. For my club, it is primarily the club members who get the equipment out and run the message boards and the pick-up games. There is a lot of effort that goes into creating these spaces, and with that comes a lot of attachment and meaning for the members. It is a very emotional thing to be contributing to. Something that interests me going forward is what that relationship looks like as the club grows. If they do get their own space or become more focused on the sport itself and elite competition-type activities – how will that shift affect the community?

**Emily:** Similarly, in football, I noticed a lot of athletes want to move up the ranks and play for more competitive teams and leagues. Maybe some of them are trying to go to Malta to play or access the larger network of European football teams. However, I am interested in the people who are volunteering for the clubs, the fans, and the third spaces that are being created outside of just the athletes. As football grows, people want to professionalize more and more, but I do not think that's necessarily a shared idea from those who are not playing on the team. For example, if your favorite place to hang out is getting pizza and a beer at the local football club in the village, then maybe you would not care so much if all the players were going to play abroad or be on the national team. There seems to be a dual perspective running where maybe some of the athletes' goals are a bit different than the community goals for the organization and structure of the club. But at the end of the day, there is a lot of shared appreciation for the sport and having this be a space for a community to be developed.

### **Positionality: What position are you playing?**

In the field, ethnographers often closely engage with participants, so ethical practice is crucial. In ethical ethnographic research, emphasis is placed on informed consent, confidentiality, and continuous reflexive awareness of the researcher's positionality (i.e., background, identity, and perspectives) and its impact on the study (Scholte 1972). When the researcher is deeply immersed in the field and interacts closely with participants, positionality becomes critical as an insider or outsider status can influence how the data will be generated and interpreted (Abu-Lughod 2008; Narayan 1993). By balancing the insider perspectives of participants with the researcher's own interpretations, ethnography offers a nuanced, holistic understanding of social phenomena.

We reflected on our own positionalities in the field as we pondered what it means to be an ethnographer in a sport club. How does access differ whether you sweat or not with the members? How do your relationships differ whether you look at the interactions between the members or more on a structural level?

**Jacob:** I entered the space explicitly as a researcher, and that is how I got to know the heads of the clubs and players. I approached the clubs as a student studying

sport, explaining that I was interested in how these athletics clubs operate in Gozo, especially basketball. I asked questions like, "Why do you play? What is this?" Just very open-ended interest in what I initially saw as a very out-of-place sport landscape. I then quickly transitioned to being a participant because I wanted to play. It is important for me not to be too much of a researcher in these spaces because I want to be a productive member of the club. I view my role as maintaining and contributing to a positive environment and paying my dues. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that I am looked at as somebody with experience in the sport relative to most people's backgrounds here. I am tall, which helps, and I play casually back home. That personal background plays a big role in how I fit in as a participant, and in the way I do fieldwork here. There is pressure on the club to mold their very small, "unskilled" teams and players into this developing elite athletics framework. That is also what has given me the opportunity to join in so seamlessly. It has shaped my relationship to the field, coming in as an American with a vague background in basketball, then suddenly, I am seen as an "expert" in some ways. Although I am not an expert at all, within this context, I am somebody who understands the basics, which makes me somewhat of a knowledgeable source and someone they can accept in this space.

**Emily:** My role has been primarily a researcher. I do not play football at a high level, and I often travel to Gozo in the football off-season. It has been a bit challenging to access these spaces as a participant observer since I do not play football; rather I have been a sounding board and just someone to talk to. I try to contribute and become a member of the community in other ways; I attend the matches, I cheer on the local teams, I spend time in the clubhouses, and I engage with people in that way.

**Solinda:** When I entered the field, I realized that the harder I sweat the more access I have. So, that has been what I was doing during the 18 months. I tried to be a dedicated training partner while carrying the hat of a researcher. This was not easy at all. I find it hard to detangle where I felt there was imbalance or ambiguity created also maybe through me being a woman wanting to appear as caring and all these social constructions that I bring with me in entering the field. During the whole time, it was a constant discussion with myself. Who am I? Where am I? How am I perceived? Am I being ethically responsible?

## Methods: What is the game plan?

After reflecting on our positionality and who we are in the field, we shared our research methods, successes, and struggles. In ethnography, the researcher is the instrument for data collection and interpretation. Although there are best practices and commonalities in ethnography, each researcher approaches the field differently. For example, the duration of the fieldwork may influence results, as might the specific research methods employed. Additionally, as often the only researcher in the space, conducting ethnography can be lonely. We experienced that, throughout the research process, the researcher learns about oneself and their ideas about how to do research “correctly,” and about how to adapt to new situations.

**Emily:** As a researcher in the field, I am not doing participant observation by playing the sport or hanging out with the team in the locker room. Instead, I use participant observation by spending a lot of time at the clubhouses talking with fans, players, and team volunteers. I also conducted semi-structured interviews and had many informal, informative conversations. Maybe I did not get to ask every question I had the way I would have if I primarily collected data through formal, structured interviews. Yet, my experiences in the field provided me with rich data that contributed more to my holistic understanding and opened up some thought processes that I did not know were important before. I might not have had some of these conversations or experiences if I always had my notes in front of me. Instead, I was learning what my interlocutors thought was important, and that was a real moment of growth for me as an ethnographer. I am here to learn from the people with the lived experiences.

**Solinda:** For me, that was a big challenge. Although I am a researcher, I also participate in the everyday activities, and that research identity kind of gets lost. I felt like I had to actively remind my interlocutors ongoingly about my role as a researcher. That is one of the reasons why I wanted to use photography; it became a tool to remind people visually: I am here. I am taking pictures. I am documenting something. Because I feel the ethical issue with doing participant observation is that you kind of become a participant, and the research becomes invisible. You are not obviously standing there with the notepad, but you participate. You go home, and you write your

field notes at home, so it is not something that is very visible.

**Jacob:** I am a member of one of the clubs, and I play basketball with them every week. They know me as a player much more so than a researcher, but that is where I get the local context. I am trying to turn into a basketball player myself, playing with everyone and dealing with all the things they deal with just to get to play. Gozo being a small island means having to travel to play and trying to access these limited resources that they rely on. Being there as a member of the club allows me to get useful insights into how things develop. I came to Gozo for the first time in 2018 and am now in my fourth summer back. The group that I play with has been the same, give or take a few people. Before now, they knew that I was only here for a short time. Going forward, it is a different dynamic as I am going to be here for a longer period. I am staying in Gozo for a full year, so these fleeting and more passive relationships I have as “the guy who is here in the summer and plays basketball with the team” will definitely change now that I am here longer term. I am not exactly sure yet how or what that will do in terms of entering and exiting the field again as a “researcher” this time. It is something that I am conscious of, and I think the best practice is just being as open and honest about any research or writing intentions as possible and otherwise, continuing to be a positive addition to the group.

## Ethics: Who is winning?

Like all social scientists, ethnographers must grapple with the question of who benefits from the research. Depending on funding, institutional expectations, and researcher goals, the beneficiary of the research is not always clearly defined. In terms of global and local power relations, different approaches can be taken. Especially in unbalanced fields of power, the question of who benefits and who is exploited is an important one to ask throughout the entire process of the research design until completely concluding the research project (Tuhivai Smith 2022).

When considering the ethics and impact of ethnographic studies in sport clubs, we discussed questions of usefulness. How do we define and recognize impact? How can our research benefit the clubs we are studying with? Can we translate skills and give meaning to our research

beyond the meaning it has for ourselves? And how do we justify it, if that is not the case?

**Solinda:** A physical thing I gave back was a frame of two meters by one meter filled with analog photographs I took during the fieldwork. It was a present to say thank you and to give back memories as well as to show how much it meant to me to be part of all those moments. I wanted to make the research a bit more transparent and accessible one more time before exiting the field.

**Jacob:** As I have previously been in the field for short amounts of time only, it is hard to talk about an ability to give back to something that I was not necessarily fully part of. However, I think there are benefits to clubs and athletes collaborating with researchers like us, especially when they are explicitly and self-consciously navigating these macro-level structures that can get a bit frustrating and alienating. It can be helpful to have somebody like me or another researcher recontextualize those things, especially if they are also participants. Specifically with my club, I just view it as my role right now to ethically participate. I do this by being a nice team member, helping the club grow where I can, and helping in practices. I want to use whatever “respect” that I have in the space in a productive way for them, which I suppose is the extent of the reciprocity that I see being appropriate right now.

**Emily:** I want to echo what Jake said about how it can be a little challenging to find meaningful ways to give back with such a short time in the field. It can be challenging to have a solid sense of reciprocity. There are some practical ways that I give back. I go support at matches, and I engage in the fundraisers. There are also some more abstract contributions that I try to make to the football clubs. For example, when I am speaking with interlocutors, I often ask questions that might be surprising or unusual. Because I am an outsider, I bring a different perspective. Some of my interlocutors have shared that they enjoyed our conversations because I encouraged them to look at their experiences from a different angle and have a new appreciation for the types of community and relationships that they are able to create in this space. It can be good to have some of these (unintentionally) reframing conversations. For example, an athlete might share that they want to improve their rankings and play at a more elite level, but I still might ask questions like, “Why did you start playing football? Why do you play football here? What do you enjoy about playing football here?” Those conversations can be

grounding and help connect back to that sense of shared identity and goals that are not necessarily strictly about performance. As a former athlete myself, I know that performance goals can be so strong and potentially overwhelming that it can be easy to become frustrated and lose sight of other aspects of enjoyment in sport. Having some of these conversations can be a nice way to remind community members of the strength that the community has and shares.

**Solinda:** I think listening to people and giving them space is already a really big thing. Also, providing another perspective is helpful. That is what I saw with my research at the gym. I tried to transform the knowledge I gained into something useful to them. For example, I wrote them a research policy report. When they started to do a charity, I got involved in doing some of the background work on that by building a narrative, combining it with my research, and working on funding applications. However, it always felt like it was not enough. In the end, I asked, did it help you in any way that I was here? The response that astonished me the most was, “Yes, of course, we had this feeling that we had something good, but now we know.” So, having this sounding board and realizing the work we do and somehow take for granted is of interest and special to someone who is doing research. Someone who values your work by looking at it from an academic perspective on communities and togetherness is worth a lot in itself. And at the same time, I think, if you promised something, you need to deliver what you promised in one way or another. It does not need to be the polished thing that you set out for it to be. It can be listening. It can be creating space. It can be being a nice team member. It can evolve during the process of research, but you cannot extract and leave or break a promise without an explanation.

**Emily:** I like the way you said it. Reciprocity is not always a big output or a big gift. Sometimes it is just the connections you make, and maybe the outside perspective is beneficial to help expand viewpoints. Knowledge flows in two ways, so being able to have these conversations is important. Perhaps this is one way of reframing what reciprocity can be.

## Rolling with the Punches

As the conversation came to an end, we left with a sense of excitement about the state of the field. Sport ethnography is a young and growing discipline (Sands 2002), and there are opportunities for sport anthropologists and sport geographers to generate exciting insights. In our conversation and reflections, we felt that we were able to learn strategies, techniques, and new information from each other. Sharing our findings and methods was exciting, but more importantly, the network created through shared experiences, successes, and struggles provided validation and comfort. Specifically, speaking about balancing between roles as an athlete and a researcher when doing experiential sport ethnography provided insights into how anthropologists must navigate different expectations and remain ethical as both a teammate and a scholar. We hope that our reflections throughout the conversation provide useful considerations for future ethnographers who seek to conduct research in sport clubs.

Additionally, we enjoyed discussing the usefulness of sport ethnography and who it can benefit. As both athletes and researchers, sport ethnographers are uniquely positioned to provide insights to sport clubs regarding their internal culture, strengths, conflicts, and perceptions of and by the surrounding communities. Sport ethnographers provide opportunities for cultural brokerage within sport clubs by helping owners or administrators learn more about who uses their facilities and what these spaces mean to the athletes. Ethnographers aim to produce "thick descriptions" that provide deep, contextual insights into social practices, interpreting these within the cultural frameworks of the communities studied (Geertz 1972). Thus, by providing thick descriptions developed through deep play (Geertz 1972), researchers can help club or gym owners create inclusive spaces by balancing the insider perspectives of athletes and participants with the researcher's own interpretations to offer a nuanced, holistic understanding of social phenomena within the sport club. We hope that athletes, gym owners, and other sport club stakeholders are inspired to collaborate with ethnographers to gain deeper insights into their community.

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