



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 20 (2019)

Catholics and Sport in a Global Context

Edited by Patrick Kelly, S.J., Seattle University

5. Persons First, Athletes Second

If Aquinas Came to the English Premier League

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Abstract

This essay draws on the author's applied experience of delivering sport psychology support to professional soccer players in the English Premier League (EPL). The work of a sports psychologist at senior levels is focused on providing a counseling-based approach, one where discussions about meaning, spirituality, and religious belief often take place. This should not surprise us since many of the soccer players in the EPL are from countries outside of Europe where there is a much higher prevalence of religious belief than in Europe itself. This essay provides a critique of the dominant perspectives in (sport) psychology and argues that we need a more personalist perspective that can accommodate words like sacrifice, play, joy, courage, faith, hope and love since these concepts are used frequently by participants to describe their experience of sport, especially at higher levels of commitment.

Keywords: soccer, Catholicism, sport psychology, human person

Introduction

The culture of high-level professional sport has been described as fast paced, ruthless, and utilitarian, in which communication is direct and brutal, and trust between people is difficult to maintain. Research into organizational cultures and sport psychology practice has found that “the nature of challenges within elite settings are shaped by the environmental and cultural features that are common in elite sport . . . a large number of employees, cultures that are volatile, unpredictable and incredibly demanding” (McDougall, Nesti, and Richardson: 266).

These cultural conditions have been reported by Mark Nesti and Martin Littlewood as being typical of what is found in EPL soccer clubs, especially at first-team levels where the pressure to achieve results is so dominant. Just one striking example of this is that currently, the head coach (and usually by extension most of their back-room staff) will on average tend to lose their jobs after only 14.3 months in post. This is because the bottom three teams each season are relegated from the EPL, and this will cost a club many millions of pounds in lost revenue from television rights and sponsorship, with consequences for player acquisition and non-playing staff retention and recruitment. Given this particular milieu it might seem surprising to suggest that sport psychology should be about more than a strict focus on performance and results. However, this is the position I will propose in this essay, which I will explain by describing the reality of delivering one-to-one psychology support to high-level professional soccer players. Unlike most of the extant literature on applied sport psychology, the perspective for a new way of looking at psychology applied to sport is based on a personalist philosophy and certain strands of existential and phenomenological psychology. These allow the psychologist to open their work up to a much broader set of terms than we would normally see in sport psychology, such as courage, play, joy, sacrifice, hope, and love. In order to understand what these terms mean, and how they could influence work in sport, there needs to be a greater willingness by both psychology and sport psychology to consider the work of philosophers and psychologists who have addressed these and other related concepts. The work of Josef Pieper seems to be especially appropriate to achieve this task. His writing draws explicitly on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, and its value lies in offering another way to understand sport from a more profound and fresh perspective. This can be seen in his seminal text, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Although this book is not usually seen as part of sport literature, I will argue that many of Pieper’s ideas have direct relevance to the work of applied sport psychologists.

In order to achieve this result, the essay is divided into three distinct but related sections. First, I describe my experience of delivering individual support to players. At this level of athlete there are great advantages to using a form of counseling in which the dialogue is focused on both wellbeing and performance agendas. This might appear to the non-psychologist as a common-sense position to adopt; however, academic sport psychology has tended not to see it this way. Within this section we will examine how some players are prepared to talk about their religious beliefs and deeply personal matters in sessions with the sport psychologist, and how this might be beneficial to them. Second, and what is the most important part of this essay, I will be discussing the reasons why I have adopted a personalist approach in my role as a psychologist, and how the ideas of a small number of Catholic writers

and scholars have influenced the way I tend to practice. Finally, in the conclusion an attempt is made to draw the key points of this essay together to hopefully encourage psychologists, sport psychologists, coaches, and anyone else who works face-to-face with athletes, to become more familiar with the work of Pieper. I would also encourage sports psychologists to engage with the ideas of those psychologists who accept that there is a transcendental dimension to being human and that we are persons made up of body, soul, and spirit.

Doing Sport Psychology inside EPL clubs

It usually comes as a great surprise to learn that there continue to be so few qualified sport psychologists working full time at soccer clubs in the wealthiest sports league outside of the USA. Some of the reasons behind this have already been identified (Corlett 1996a). Typically, the challenges are around understanding what role the sport psychologist can play and how this might differ from other staff (especially coaches), how effectiveness can be measured, and confusion about the difference between clinical and sport psychology. In addition to these more theoretically bound concerns, there is the problem of the voluntary nature of psychological support. To appreciate this one has only to think about the injured player or the athlete seeking a return to match fitness. In both cases the head coach and their staff would insist that the individual must engage in a systematic fitness or injury rehabilitation program with the appropriate staff. Commitment to this work would not be dependent on whether the athlete wished to get better or fitter; direction would come from above and compliance would be assured. Psychology is so very different in this respect. Almost all approaches in psychology accept that without the full consent of the person and their desire to take part in the sessions, nothing beneficial can really be achieved. This issue has been framed in relation to the importance of personal motivation in psychology. Cognitive psychology in particular emphasizes the centrality of motivation in understanding human thinking and behavior. Before the advent of modern psychological theory, motivation was more usually defined in terms of will power and the will. Although modern scientific psychology has tended to view the will as a hangover from when the discipline was subsumed within philosophy (Giorgi), this term captures something extra that more (natural) scientific sounding words like motivation and drive are unable to articulate. Will, will power, and even free will itself are used to convey the idea that our thoughts and actions originate with ourselves, and that this factor represents the most important part of our psychological makeup, despite the forces of biology and the environment. For example, we use the words “will power” in relation to someone to describe a specific quality of a person – the capacity to persist despite great obstacles. This type of usage suggests that the will is not just another psychological force or drive that governs our actions, but rather it represents a deeper layer of our being. Many branches of psychology reject the idea of the will, seeing it as a philosophical term that cannot be measured or quantified (Nesti 2004).

Returning to the very particular environment of EPL soccer and the place of sport psychology in this high-performance culture, some have described it as a highly volatile and macho environment in which trust is valued highly but under constant threat (Nesti, Littlewood, O’Halloran, Eubank, and Richardson). The players face continual challenges to their identities through repeated deselection from starting lineups, being sent on loan or sold to other clubs, facing career ending injuries and premature retirement. These critical moments

(Nesti and Littlewood 2011) in a player's life bring existential anxiety and can be very uncomfortable to experience. It is especially at and around these moments in a player's career that the sport psychologist may be able to do their most important work.

The global makeup of the playing staff in the EPL has been noted in recent times, and currently over 75% of first team players are from outside the UK (Strudwick). A very sizeable number of these players are from countries where Catholicism is the dominant religious belief, and it is not uncommon to find that for several of these world-class athletes their religious belief is a very important part of who they are. The one-to-one encounters that I have been able to use inside the clubs have been fully confidential to ensure that each player is able to speak freely about any matter that they feel may be impacting performance. Given that a counseling-based approach provides the framework for this dialogue, it is unsurprising that players will often discuss both narrow, more soccer-specific issues and broader life concerns. Sometimes when a player is facing difficult moments in their professional and personal lives they will talk about the need to do what is best for themselves and their family. This level of dialogue is not about motivation or developing confidence but is centered on deeper realities, such as finding the important underlying meaning (Frankl) to support a course of action. This source of meaning could be about a player's deeply held values, philosophical perspectives on life, or their religious belief. This may be expressed in a number of different ways, depending on the personality and life experience of the person, and the culture they are from.

For example, one highly experienced player was, for the first time in their soccer-playing lives, encountering rejection in that they had been dropped from the starting lineup for a prolonged period of time. This was being reported in a very negative way in the national and international media and was causing considerable discomfort for close family and friends. In this situation the player discussed how important their Catholic faith was in reminding them that "despite being rejected by the club and the head coach, I have the unconditional love of God behind me, and this means that to me there is a plan for me where things will get better, even if at the moment it does not feel that way!"

On other occasions, the dialogue in these encounters has included reference to the concepts of courage, play, spirit, joy, sacrifice, humility, and love. And although these athletes are amongst some of the best paid in the world, it is not unusual to hear them mention the need to make sacrifices, suffer their lot, and accept setbacks with humility. Sometimes these very words are used by the players in the counseling sessions. More usually, they are left unsaid. However, after a closer examination of what has been expressed it becomes clear that players are offering examples and describing situations that they clearly feel are moments involving suffering of some sort, sacrifices, or testing their spirit. For example, players who have come to the EPL from another country often talk about the sacrifice they are making in leaving loved ones and family behind. Sacrifice is also used to describe the reality that to remain as a world-class athlete there must be dedication to a rigorous regime, which often involves heavy physical training, little socializing, strict diets, and psychological pressure. Despite great material wealth, many of the best players I have worked with willingly accept this level of disciplined living and sacrifice in the knowledge that it is required in order to play as well as they are able and to contribute to the team.

Sport psychology, based as it has mostly been on cognitive psychology, does not – indeed, from an epistemological perspective, cannot – recognize terms such as courage, hope, love, and sacrifice. This is because the cognitive approach rests on natural science foundations, which in turn only deal with those things that can be measured and verified empirically. Such terms do not fit easily into such a reductionist and positivist framework, and consequently, they are rarely (if ever) mentioned in traditional sport psychology literature. The result that follows from this is that a large part of the player’s experience and account is excluded. For the player this could be interpreted that the psychologist does not think their story is important or makes sense; the psychologist has also lost something, namely the ability to empathize and fully grasp the situation facing the player from the player’s perspective. This could quite easily lead to a situation where the player might refuse to work with the sport psychologist because they perceive that the psychologist is more interested in following the strictures of their theories, instead of listening to the realities faced by the player.

A more promising development is that phenomenological psychology has begun to be studied in relation to trying to better understand the lives of sports performers (O’Halloran, Littlewood, Tod, and Nesti). Phenomenology itself has a long history of involvement with various Catholic thinkers and philosophers. I have in mind here Edith Stein, Gabriel Marcel, and Pope John Paul II, who all found in this approach something that was intrinsically connected to the philosophy of both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. In very basic terms, phenomenology is an attempt to study reality by looking beyond the subject/object division to what is presented to us in our everyday encounters with people and the world. One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows the psychologist to acknowledge and attend to another’s accounts in their own terms and from where they stand. This means that the sport psychologist drawing on phenomenology would be able to accept words like courage, spirit, joy, and sacrifice used by the athletes. In addition to this more personalist view of psychology, some strands of existential psychology are able to accommodate terms like authenticity, sacrifice, courage, and transcendence (Ronkainen and Nesti). Existentialism was popularized by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1950s and 60s; unlike Søren Kierkegaard, the father of modern existential thinking and a committed Christian thinker, Sartre was an atheist, and is usually credited with establishing the postmodern movement. In contrast, Catholic intellectuals with an interest in existential psychology or philosophy – like Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Igor Caruso, and Adrian Van Kaam – have given psychology, and by extension sport psychology, the tools to engage with broader topics including those that center on questions about the meaning of life and belief in God. Unfortunately, existential ideas may appear very complex at times; sometimes the language and terminology can be quite unfamiliar and difficult to comprehend. According to Noora Ronkainen (Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood, and Nesti), these facts have been an obstacle to its general acceptance in psychology and have prevented a wider appreciation of existential writing and ideas. Fortunately, there is a body of work that shares much with both phenomenology and existentialism (Van Kaam), but which is easy to read, even if the ideas expressed are often profound and complex. I am referring to the extensive work of the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper. In the next section we will turn to look at some of his writing, especially from his book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, which I believe has immense value for scholars and practitioners in

sport psychology, and indeed for all social science disciplines dealing with various aspects around the topic of sport.

Persons at Play

“It is necessary for the perfection of human society that there should be men who devote their lives to contemplation” (Aquinas; quoted in Pieper 1963: 41). This sentence would appear to have nothing at all to do with the life of a top-level athlete in which hard work is expected in return for money and fame. The word contemplation usually brings to mind an idea of repose, relaxation, and rest. It is used erroneously, but frequently, as another term for meditation. Contemplation takes place according to Pieper at moments where human persons through intuition, and by coming into direct contact with reality, possess what they love. In this sense, contemplation requires our active participation; most usually this takes place without bodily movement. Sometimes though, contemplation occurs alongside physical movements like walking or running. In respect of this, Thomas Aquinas was said to have often walked briskly around the university cloisters in a state of intense contemplation. Pieper points out that almost any activity can be a source for contemplation, and that it is not only to be found in prayer and quiet repose, but in music, dance, and play (Pieper 1998). This view of contemplation could be used to better understand professional soccer players in the EPL and the work of the sport psychologist who supports them. Despite sounding very complex, I would argue that this particular concept of contemplation, based as it is on the thinking of Aristotle and Aquinas, connects closely to the idea of play. Patrick Kelly argues that Aquinas actually describes contemplation as being a form of play, and that it shares a similar psychology in being focused strictly on the present. If we look at how Pieper has described contemplation, he suggests that it involves self-forgetfulness, immersion in the here and now, and as sport psychologists might say, requires a pure focus on the task at hand. This is also very near to the psychological state of flow which was described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in relation to optimal performance and joy in sports, and which can be experienced in a wide range of other activities.

Arguably, one of the most important words we would normally associate with sport at all standards of play would be joy. After all, from recreational to the very highest levels, sports men and women constantly talk about the joy they have encountered in their lives in sport. How quite remarkable then that this term is almost impossible to find in any book or article on sport psychology. It could be argued that Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory, which has been applied to sport, describes flow as involving feelings of deep joy. This body of work however has not usually been considered as traditional academic sport psychology, not least because it is grounded in phenomenology and mainstream psychology. Once again, the work of James Schall (2013) and Pieper (1989) is a considerable help in understanding why this is the case. As they explain, joy is often seen as just another name for fun, something that is essentially frivolous, or if not this, then at least a distraction from the more important matters of life (Pieper 1989). This bias in relation to joy has many roots; one of the most relevant to our argument is that it is based on a theology that is suspicious of enjoyment and human joy. This view, which is grounded in particular strands of Protestant theology, tends to describe joy as something that can only be meaningfully experienced after death, and for those fortunate enough to be reunited with their creator, God. It may also reflect a suspicion found within

some forms of Protestantism that view joy and enjoyment as something illicit that leads to, or is associated with, sin. The Catholic view also agrees with the proposition that the ultimate satiation of joy will be for those who enter heaven, however, it adds that a foretaste of this joy is available to human beings here on earth. Pieper, in drawing on Aquinas, explains that this is possible because “joy is an expression of love.” And he goes on to say that “one who loves nothing and nobody cannot possibly rejoice, no matter how deeply he craves it. Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves” (Pieper 1989: 153). That joy is related to love and love is connected to suffering is something we read in Pieper (1998). Maybe more surprisingly, Sigmund Freud, the founder of the deterministic system of psychoanalysis, claimed that the only way to avoid suffering was to love no one and no thing. Therefore, if joy is a by-product of love, it becomes possible to see that this desirable state may sometimes take place before, during, or after participation in sport. The value of this account of joy in my work as a sport psychologist is that it has allowed me to understand that joy does not preclude sacrifice, suffering, or existential anxiety. In fact, it may be more accurate to say that without such experiences and feelings, deep joy at achieving a desired goal is an impossibility. It is this link between joy and facing up to and passing through troubles and difficulties with courage that has helped me see the players sitting in front of me as ordinary human persons pursuing something they love.

The key precursor to being able to achieve a state of contemplation and the spirit of play is trust. Pieper points out that this type of existential trust is based on a belief that there exists meaning in the world beyond that which we create, and that this ultimate source of meaning is what we usually refer to as God. It is against this background that we can more easily understand why a player might mention God within a sport psychology session. This idea of a divine creator of life enables individuals to see themselves as more than material objects or mere workers, but as free human beings whose lives cannot be reduced solely to utilitarian projects, social roles, and functions. Following from this, the person is understood as an end in themselves; they are not a means to something else. According to Pieper, persons are sovereign beings, in possession of self-consciousness, and aware that they are on a journey towards some form of ultimate destination. In more theological terms, we say that the person is created to serve others and worship God. Another way that this has been expressed by some strands of personalist psychology is that the human person, because they have free will and must make choices, is a being in a state of becoming, moving towards a future that they cannot fully know. These understandings of the person can also be helpful in relation to the journey of the player. This personalist account makes it possible to see that words like sacrifice, suffering, courage, and joy can have a real meaning in all human lives, and that just because EPL players may have immense material wealth and status, they are not protected from these unavoidable existential facts. Indeed, in some ways because of the high degree of insecurity that exists in elite professional sport, given that careers can end abruptly through injury or with a change in playing status, it is common for players to talk about the anxiety they encounter relating to their transient identity (May). It is during dialogue in these moments that some players will acknowledge how important it is to them that their own identity is grounded in a religious faith and that they are able to put their trust in God.

The ideas of the Jesuit priest and former professor of political science at Georgetown University, James Schall, are very important here because they explain how play, music, and

sport are just as serious, and in some ways even more serious, than those elements of life that we would normally call serious. In agreement with Pieper, Schall questions a hierarchy that places work at the top and relegates non-utilitarian activity like play, music, religious worship, and friendship to lower down the order. He argues that two of the most important human attributes, our capacity for love and desire for knowledge and wisdom (what Pieper calls the philosophical act), are most clearly found outside of the functional and the instrumental, and in those activities that, paradoxically, are not necessary for our survival. Here, Schall is describing the world beyond work, jobs, and careers, a place where we can do things just for their own sake. It seems to me that it is in these moments, when nothing is produced as such, that joy, happiness, love, suffering, sacrifice, and despair can be fully encountered because they accompany those things we love and the things we freely choose to do. These experiences can be encountered in a wide range of human activities including intensely physical competitive contact sports, or in more cerebral activities like chess. In relation to this, it was G. K. Chesterton who pointed out that children's games were the most important things in the world, for children at least! Several of his books bring out the strange paradox that most of us would rather play than work, but that children usually play with all the intensity of work. Chesterton sees in this data from the empirical world, that is the world of reality rather than that of abstraction and theory, evidence that human persons are ultimately not made for the utilitarian world of work at all, but that their real home is to be found in a state of pure play. In his brilliant yet amusing way, he has written about how music, feasting, play, and games allow adults to re-enter the wholesome and healthy wisdom of children, to become of childlike spirit, because as the Gospel tells us, it is those who become like children who will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

This philosophical and theological material has been incredibly helpful in my work with EPL players because it has allowed me to remember that I am dealing with human persons first and athletes second. This phrase, somewhat ironically, has been cited by many in sport psychology since Rainer Martens used it to encourage the development of a more convincingly humanist perspective in sport psychology. Unfortunately for the most part, the academic discipline of sport psychology has failed to meet Martens's challenge. I would argue that it will continue to ignore his call to focus on the person first and the athlete second unless sport psychology reflects more deeply on questions around what constitutes a human person, and how sport can be a part of life where the virtues of courage, humility, and temperance are encountered frequently (Pisk).

During many years working as a sport psychologist, it has been a remarkable experience to listen to EPL players talk about the importance of play and playing in their lives. A closer examination of what the players talk about in psychology sessions reveals that especially in the most difficult moments, individuals talk about how they know that their best performances usually take place when they throw themselves without inhibition into the task. It could be argued that throwing oneself fully into an activity in this way, without thought about consequences or future achievement, is very close to psychological descriptions of play. And as has been argued in this essay, Pieper (1989) has called play a special form of active contemplation, since during this mode we dwell *in* the task and experience things holistically. He has pointed out that contemplation can happen throughout all of life including in active pursuits like art and other creative activity. Although he does not include sport as an activity

where contemplation can occur, he points out that “inconspicuous forms of contemplation deserve more attention, more thought: they deserve to be encouraged. We need to be expressly reassured of the fact that many of the experiences we have in the course of our day-to-day lives are in fact worthy of all the praise which has been justly accorded to the contemplative life.” (Pieper 1989: 144). This type of insight could be very useful in understanding the human person and sport, even for those for whom sport is simultaneously their work or career and their love or vocation.

At play dualisms melt away and body, mind, and spirit become one with the task itself. And when means and ends converge in this way human beings can encounter joy. Pieper refers to joy as being ultimately a byproduct. In other words, it is not something we can work for and take as a right in return for our efforts. Echoing what Thomas Aquinas had to say on the matter, he says joy is a gift, something we experience as an immense happiness, but also we might add, with a sense of surprise. Another way to express this is that it feels as though we have been blessed by good fortune and that whilst our own efforts may have helped we still feel grateful to something or someone else that is not us. Pieper argues convincingly that this something else is in fact the creator of all being, namely God. Professional soccer players, especially those who understand joy as a God-given gift to mankind, are able to see how Catholic notions around play can link to their lives, even in highly charged and volatile sport performance cultures. From within a US perspective, the work of Michael Novak similarly claims that joy is not only the preserve of amateur and youth athletes, but that it can be experienced at all levels of sport.

Courage and Identity

Although it would not be true to say that these performance enhancement and wellbeing counseling sessions with players always resemble a philosophical or even theological discussion, the conversation does move in this direction especially when the player or their family are facing very challenging situations. These threats to identity (Nesti 2016) can have the effect of throwing the player back on themselves, encouraging a deeper level of reflection about what is most important to them, and how this has helped in the past. Often on these occasions, especially if the player has been educated within a Christian framework, there will be mention of the need to do the right thing even if the outcome is uncertain. John Corlett (1996b), drawing on Aquinas, describes courage in similar terms. In applying this to sport psychology, Corlett argued that courage exists because amongst other things, the athlete will always face anxiety in pursuit of their goals. He describes this in ways that are close to existential psychology in pointing out that this type of anxiety often arises as the accompaniment to facing up to a challenge. He advocates that rather than teach athletes mental skills aimed at removing the uncomfortable feeling of anxiety (which is the usual approach), sport psychologists and others need to help athletes develop courage in order to be able to persist in their task, even where this means that anxiety will still be experienced. In my work with EPL players’ existential anxiety of this kind is a common occurrence. I have often noticed how the best or most successful players are prepared to try to face their challenges head on, and seek solutions even where this is a very uncomfortable situation for them to be in. In doing this with the player, we are not trying to build the currently fashionable term of mental toughness; instead the aim is to help the athlete choose a course of action after careful thought

about what is the best and morally correct thing to do. According to Aquinas, it is this type of action that develops the virtue of courage. In my applied experiences in the clubs I often heard senior coaches comment that they wanted players with courage, or in their words, players who would take responsibility to do the right thing even in tough situations. The circumstances they had in mind were about both on-field or off-field tasks. They ranged from being prepared to keep asking to receive the ball during a match when they were struggling for form, to being able to resist agents, media, or other powerful influences who wanted them to leave the club against their better judgment for an improved contract or increased transfer fee.

Conclusion

As recent work has identified, many high level and professional athletes have a religious faith and view the human person in spiritual terms (Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, and Aoyagi). I have argued that, especially in a global sport league like the English Premiership, we should not be surprised to find that a large number of athletes possess an active Christian faith, and that a high proportion are Catholics. To be able to understand the importance of religious faith for these players, a new openness to unfamiliar ideas and concepts is needed in sport psychology. That these will often be borrowed from philosophy and even theology should not concern us. Of greater importance is that such a development would allow words like courage, play, joy, sacrifice, hope, and love to be taken seriously by psychologists and researchers in sport. This is an essential task if we are to close the gap that currently exists between the lived world of the athletes and coaches, and those who study and work with them (Martens). In this respect, I believe that the work of Josef Pieper holds great promise for the field; serious study of his ideas will let us think differently about the relationship between play, leisure and sport. That much of his thinking is based explicitly on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is to be welcomed. After all, Aquinas was one of the first Christian writers to take play and leisure seriously. And just like his predecessor Aristotle, he saw that life could not be merely reduced to work since work always points to something outside itself. For Aristotle that external thing was leisure; for Aquinas it was play, love of other human persons, and worshipping our creator. The hope is that, in the future, we will see a psychology for sport which will be able to offer researchers and those who do applied work the conceptual tools necessary to meet the needs of both the person and the player, since the two are inseparable. It is only by returning to earlier ideas that describe the human person as a unity of body, soul, and spirit that the discipline of sport psychology can begin to more fully realize its potential. That is, as a discipline that serves the needs of the human person and sport, rather than the desires of those for whom sport will always be just another thing amongst things!

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