

PHIL 850

Topics in Recent Philosophy:
Philosophy of Sports

Last updated: 23 August 2026

Instructor Contact Information

Instructor Name and Preferred Title: Prof. Ben Caplan

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Office: 3075 Wescoe Hall

Office Hours: W 3:30–4:30 PM, F 1:00–2:00 PM, or by appointment

Class Time and Location

Class Time: M 3:30–5:30 PM

Class Location: 3097 Wescoe Hall

Semester: Fall 2026

Course Hours and Instructional Methods

Credit Hours: 3. Each credit hour corresponds to “a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks” (adapted from <https://policy.ku.edu/registrar/credit-hour>).

Instructional method: LEC. This is an in-person class. It will include lecture and in-class discussion.

Seminar Description

The seminar is on philosophy of sports. We will focus mainly on the intersection between questions that might arise in the course of participating in, or following, sports, on the one hand, and theoretical issues in metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed, on the other.

Questions to be discussed include the following. Why do we care about sports, if we don't think it really matters? Are we just pretending to care, or do we really care? What happens when sports teams merge or split (or, worse, split and then re-merge)? How many teams were there before the split? Does the same team exist at more than one time? What is momentum in sports? Is it a real thing, or is it merely something that people mistakenly believe in? What happens when a goal is disallowed or, more generally, when a retroactive sports declaration comes into effect? Does the change in call change the past, or was it a non-goal all along and we just didn't know it until the change in call?

We will read some philosophy of sports but also some philosophy of non-sports (i.e. some philosophy, particularly metaphysics and philosophy of language, that isn't directly about

sports) and some non-philosophy of sports (i.e. some things that are about sports but aren't directly about philosophy).

Course Materials

Course materials will be available to students on Canvas.

Course Assignments and Requirements

Seminar paper

Weekly check-ins	10%
Abstracts (2)	10%
Seminar paper	50%
Post-submission discussion/ Preparation for presentation	5%

Presentation

Handout	5%
Presentation	20%

One of the goals of the seminar is for you to develop a paper that you can submit to conferences and a presentation that you can give at conferences.

Presentations will take place during the last seminar meeting, **Monday, 7 December 2026**. The presentation will be based on the seminar paper, which is due two weeks earlier, on **Monday, 23 November 2026**. This is to make sure that there's time for me to read the paper, for us to meet to talk about it, and for you to make revisions before you present it. (You are required to meet with me after submitting the paper to talk about it and prepare for the presentation.)

Writing a seminar paper is a *process*, and part of my job is to help you figure out how best to navigate that process. You should start thinking about possible seminar paper topics as early in the semester as possible. If you're interested in a topic that we'll discuss later in the seminar, don't wait until later in the semester to start thinking about it; start thinking about it now! As part of the process, you are required to check-in with me every week, starting in Week 1; stop by on Friday afternoons or schedule a separate meeting. (The 1:00–2:00 PM timeslot on Fridays is reserved for students in this seminar. If I'm out of town, we can meet by Zoom or on another day.) The point of these meetings is to make sure that you have the guidance, support, and feedback you need throughout the process of writing a seminar paper. What this process looks like might be different for different people, which is why I'm requiring you to meet with me individually.

You will need to write an abstract for your seminar paper; in fact, you will need to write two abstracts for your seminar paper. The first abstract is due two weeks *before* the paper, i.e.

on **Monday, 9 November 2026**. The second abstract is due one week *after* the paper, i.e. on **Monday, 30 November 2026**. What if you haven't finished your paper by 9 November 2026? Great! Sometimes you have to write an abstract, e.g. to submit to a conference, before the paper exists. What if the second abstract is completely different than the first? Great! Sometimes it's only after writing a paper that you have a good idea of what it was *really* about.

The abstracts should be under 250 words (each). The seminar paper itself should be 2500–3000 words. 250 words for each abstract, and 3000 words for the paper, are hard upper limits. This is because some conferences have hard upper limits.

You will need to make a handout for your presentation. We'll talk in seminar about how to make a handout, and also about how to write abstracts.

Summary of due dates

First abstract	9 November 2026
Paper	23 November 2026
Second abstract	30 November 2026
Presentation	7 December 2026
Handout	7 December 2026

You are not permitted to use generative AI for any part of the paper-writing process (that is, for writing the paper, or the abstracts, or the handout, or for preparing for your meetings with me, or for preparing for your presentation).

In addition, to pass the course you are required to take and pass the graduate-level Indiana University Certification Test on plagiarism: <https://plagiarism.tedfrick.me>. (If you are already taking the Certification Test for another course (e.g. PHIL 800), you don't need to take it more than once.)

Grading Scale¹

From	To	Letter grade
93.50	100.00	A
90.00	93.49	A–
86.50	89.99	B+
83.50	86.49	B
80.00	83.49	B–
76.50	79.99	C+
73.50	76.49	C
70.00	73.49	C–
66.50	69.99	D+
63.50	66.49	D
60.00	63.49	D–
00.00	59.99	F

Unless you make arrangements with me before hand, late work will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day (or fraction thereof).

Incomplete Grades

You may be assigned an 'I' (Incomplete) grade if you are unable to complete some portion of the assigned coursework because of an unanticipated illness, accident, work-related responsibility, family hardship, or verified learning disability. An Incomplete grade is not intended to give you additional time to complete course assignments or extra credit unless there is indication that the specified circumstances prevented you from completing course assignments on time.

Attendance Policy

Please see the University Excused Absences policy (USRR 2.2.1) at <https://policy.ku.edu/governance/USRR#excused>.

Academic Success

I'm committed to making this class as accessible as possible. If you have any accommodation requests, please let me know as soon as possible.

Please see the Student Resources Page on the Academic Success website at <https://academicsuccess.ku.edu/student-resources-0>.

In addition to any policies and resources noted above, the KU Academic Success Student Resources website (<https://academicsuccess.ku.edu/student-resources-0>) provides links to KU Policies and Resources pertaining to religious observances; academic misconduct; grade changes; commercial note-taking; commitment to integrity and ethical conduct; the

¹ See Ben Eggleston, "Plus/Minus Grading," at http://www.benegg.net/plus-minus_grading.pdf.

KBOR statement on free expression; mandatory reporting; nondiscrimination, harassment, and equal opportunity; sexual harassment; student rights and responsibilities; and weapons, including firearms.

If you have questions or concerns about any of these policies, statements, or resources, please let me know, or contact Student Affairs directly.

Concealed Carry

If you carry a concealed handgun, familiarize yourself both with the relevant state and federal laws and with KU's weapons policy at <https://concealedcarry.ku.edu/information>.

Artificial Intelligence

My policy on generative AI for this seminar is straightforward: it's **forbidden**. That means that you're not permitted to use generative AI for *any* part of this course, including coming up with ideas as well as producing, translating, editing, or summarizing texts. That also means that you're not allowed to wear AI glasses. If you're unsure about whether a use of generative AI is permitted or not, please check with me! But you should always err on the side of assuming that it's **not** permitted.

Course Schedule

The first day of class is Monday, 24 August 2026. The last day of class Monday, 7 December 2026.

There is no class on the following dates: Monday, 7 September 2026 (Labor Day); Monday, 21 September 2026 (Yom Kippur); and Monday, 19 October 2026 (Fall Break).

A more detailed schedule will be available on Canvas. I reserve the right to make changes to the schedule and reading list as we go along; these changes will be announced in class and on Canvas.

Tentative reading list

1. The paradox of fiction and the paradox of sport

Fred Kroon and Alberto Voltolini (2019), "Fiction," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Section 4 ("The Paradox of Fiction")
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fiction/#ParaFict>

Kendall L. Walton (2015), "'It's Only a Game!': Sports as Fiction," in *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence* (Oxford University Press), 75–83.

Alfred Archer and Jake Wojtowicz (2022), “It’s Much More Important Than That: Against Fictionalist Accounts of Fandom,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 49 (1): 83–98.

2. The identity of sports teams over time

Alyssa Ney (2023), *Metaphysics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Routledge), Chapter 9 (“Persistence”), Sections 9.2, 9.4, and 9.5.

August Faller (2021), “How Groups Persist,” *Synthese* 198 (8): 7149–7163.

3. Material constitution, ambiguity, context-sensitivity, Japanese shrines, and the Stanley Cup

Ryan Wasserman (2026), “Material Constitution,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/material-constitution/>

Adam Sennet (2021), “Ambiguity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity/>

David Braun (2015), “Indexicals,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, esp. Sections 1–3

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/indexicals/>

Dominic Mciver Lopes (2007), “*Shikinen Sengu* and the Ontology of Architecture in Japan,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (1): 77–84.

Rafael de Clercq (2008), “Lopes on the Ontology of Japanese Shrines,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2): 193–194.

Dominic Mciver Lopes (2008), “Reference, Ontology, and Architecture: Response to Rafael De Clercq,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2): 194–196.

Andrew Podnieks (2004), *Lord Stanley’s Cup* (Triumph), pp. 9–10 (“The Ever-Changing Stanley Cup” and “The Abandoned Ring”).

4. What is momentum in sports?

Peter Adler and Patricia M. Adler (1978), “The Role of Momentum in Sports,” *Urban Life* 7 (2): 153–176.

Jim Taylor and Andrew Demick (1994), “A Multidimensional Model of Momentum in Sports,” *Journal of Applied Sports Psychology* 6 (1): 51–70.

David Hale (2021), "Is Momentum Real? An In-Depth Investigation of Sports' Most Overused Term," *ESPN*

https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/32910904/is-momentum-real-depth-investigation-sports-most-overused-term

Jonny Whitmore (2021), "What Is Match Momentum?"

<https://theanalyst.com/articles/what-is-match-momentum>

5. What are disallowed goals?

Whether it's a goal or not is a social fact.

Steffen Borge (2015), "Sports Records Are Social Facts," *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 9 (4): 351–362.

A disallowed goal was a goal, but now it's the case that it wasn't.

Luca Barlassina and Fabio Del Prete (2015), "The Puzzle of the Changing Past," *Analysis* 75 (1): 59–67.

Arthur Schipper (2022), "Necessitation and Changing the Past," *Theoria* 88 (5): 997–1013.

Kennett Silver (2024), "Backwards Causation in Social Institutions," *Erkenntnis* 89 (5): 1973–1991.

It was never a goal, because of something that happened at the time.

Terence Rajivan Edward (2015), "Did the Past Really Change in 2012?," *Organon F* 22 (3): 340–344.

Richard Corry (2025), "Rewriting History: Backwards Causation and Conflicting Declarations among Institutional Facts," *Erkenntnis* 90 (5): 1847–1863.

It was never a goal, because of something that happened later.

Andrea Iacona (2016), "On the Puzzle of Changing the Past," *Philosophia* 44 (1): 137–142.

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg (2025), "Is There Backward Generation in the Institutional Realm?," *Metaphysics* 8 (1): 16–31.

It was a goal according to the referees, but now it isn't a goal according to the referees.

Alexander Geddes (2025), "Resolving the Puzzle of the Changing Past," *Inquiry* 68 (7): 2264–2270.