



Here's a selection of poems on our 'Games' theme for you to enjoy. The Ian Duhig and Philip Gross poems appear by kind permission of the poets: the others are all taken from [Not Just a Game: Sporting Poems](#) (Five Leaves Press) and appear by kind permission of the publisher.

All in a game

Sue Dymoke

Under starter's orders they wait
to bully off, dive in, kick off
break off, take aim, tee off
tip off, catch the wave, cast off

they're poised for
the throw up, quick start
splashdown

they're ready, they're steady, they get set
the whistle blows, pistol fires,
bleeper sounds, umpire calls

and they serve play run pass
dr
 ib
 bl
 e

and they leap dodge throw sprint
sh my
 im

and they slide edge swerve hit
 y
 e
 l
 l
 o
 v

and they drive chip curl bowl

g
o
o
g
l
i
e
s

and they score ace catch smash

b
i
r
d
i
e

(or they FOUL! miss, net, dr
op
no ball)

Off piste in the sin bin rough
some are red carded, timed out and taking the
l o n g w a l k
to an early bath

while the rest go on towards
the eighteenth green
last hurdle
final quarter

the twelfth round
last lap
final metre

the tenth wicket
home straight
final over

the match point
golden goal
clear water

On and on and on to
the chequered flag,
close of play
when they'll relive
the sweat, grief and tears
joy, hope and fears
missed chances

backward glances
the 90 minutes, 10 wickets
2 halves, 3 sets
worth of defeat or glory
of pleasure or pain
their side of each game's story
replay it all over again

Goal

Philip Gross

One flash and no looking back, that
moment, soundless,
through the plate-glass frontage
of the big-screen (*Catch The Big Game*
BIGGER!) bar: some

goal! has lifted them clean off their bar stools
and out of themselves,
their mouths wide, like one full-on
gust of wind; there may be words
and, somewhere, losers

(in some mirror-image bar) but here,
now, he's untouchable—
one lad in the dozen, a tad doughy
where his cheap kit top rides up, but hey,
a good half-metre skyward

as if hoisted by his high-flung fists—
Ye-e-es!—launched
like a toddler from a rough grip
under armpits, as if gravity had shrugged
and dad's glasspaper grin

could be always below, great laughter
like God's, without words
in any language, without rights or wrongs
or sides to fall back into. Why else
can we dream of flying,

unless we were made for this?

Games

Ian Duhig

Weber could not tell a Punjabi from a Kilkenny man.

-Christy Campbell, 'The Maharajah's Box'

The former prospective Tory parliamentary candidate for Whitby, Maharajah Duleep Singh, Sikh 'Chess King' in 'the Great Game', slipped into Russia as Patrick Casey, the Republican dynamitard;

he bore proposals for stationing Irish volunteers on their border to guard the building of a railway for the Czar's invasion forces, given Russia's declared interest in liberating the sub-continent.

The King maintained clandestine links with Russian intelligence (noted the Department for the Suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity) through the Aryan League of Honour, rogue Calcutta Theosophists;

their agent in the British Isles was W.B. Yeats' Mohini Chatterjee, who misinformed him on Vedantic philosophy, so Yeats confused Brahman, the Supreme Being, with Brahmin, Chatterjee's caste.

Yeats' 'Mohini Chatterjee' "quotes" his guru: "*I have been a king, I have been a slave*", although the next verse goes on to state *Mohini Chatterjee/Spoke these, or words like these...*" How like?

Poets lie too, taking liberties and licence. Check Plato's 'Republic'. Even 'Campbell', surname of the supplier of this poem's epigraph, means 'Crooked mouth' in Gaelic. Check that with a MacDonald.

Methuselah's Losers

Andy Croft

A quick one-two, a turn, a screaming shot,
Back off the post, a run through the defence
To knock it straight back in, and though we've not
Yet touched the ball, we're one-nil down against
A team whose youth and energy subdues us
And makes us feel a bunch of hopeless losers.

Because Methuselah's too long to go
On Third Division league and fixture lists
We play as Losers and/or Meths – as though
We only lose because we're always pissed!
There's better teams than us made up of boozers,
And being sober's no help to the Losers.

At least we are consistent; losing streaks
Like ours take years and years of bloody training,
It's hard to be this bad, you need technique;
So please don't get me wrong, we're not complaining,
We don't think being useless helps excuse us,
It's just that practice makes us perfect losers !

You do not have to win to feel the buzz
Of sweat, testosterone and self-display;
Part circus show (including clowns like us)
Part theatre, part athletics, part ballet,
A game designed for gents that's played by bruisers
Who are long past their prime (just like Meths Losers)

Who, stuck in check-out queues and traffic lights
And meetings still replay the games we've played
On Sunday mornings or on Wednesday nights,
The well-timed tackles, passes, goals we've made,
The unrecorded triumphs which enthuse us
Enough to turn out weekly for the Losers.

I like defeat, its sweaty, human smell,
Familiar as a much replayed own goal
Or spannered shot; this losing fits me well
(Just like our too-tight strip !) and on the whole
I think a winning sequence would confuse us,
At least you know just where you are with losers.

While those who can afford it cheer success
Via satellite TV and sponsors' boxes,
On sweaty 5-a-side courts we transgress
The age's most unbending orthodoxies:
To be the worst! The thought somehow renews us:
Down with success! And up with all the losers!

Not coming first's an honourable aim
When winning is the only Good; there's pride
In coming last, in losing every game,
In being always on the losing side.
The games we really should have won accuse us:
Success belongs to others, not to losers.

Let's hear it then for those who're past their best;
Without us there would not be many winners,
We're here to make the numbers up, the Rest,
To teach the art of losing to beginners;
Their shiny, bright successes just amuse us,
For even winners have to play with losers.

So here's to hopeless losers everywhere
Who know we're stuffed before we even start,
Who live with disappointment and despair,
Who turn defeat into a kind of art;
An army of dissenters and refusers,
We'd change the world - if we weren't such good losers!

Bad Light

S.J. Litherland

The ruffled flags, deep bank of trees under gloom,

cold eddies of air, the swaddled wicket,
no-one sitting on the terraces,

this the coal face of a dank dark day,
the Riverside windy bowl unstirred

by strokes, empty of attention. Members sit
at white clothed tables hoping. Nasser's opening.

Held onto like a talisman.

This the place of slow appreciation
and the contemplation of the circle.

Only those who keep the game are here,
no TV, no crowds, no glamour,

the enactment of a rite passed on
by rules, history and pleasure.

The verse patterns that weave
the great battles and small,

the slow heroic sweep of epic time,
each delivery a line in stanzaic overs,

runners crossing like harpists' hands,
each delivery point and counter point,

question and reply like an ancient choir.

Batsmen flamboyant as chiefs
who fought battles in couplets of poetry.

The strung out fielders set as a trap,
as one by one the bowlers

connive to lure these heroes
to the pavilion. It's what keeps us waiting,

patience learnt like the ancient art of listening.

Bad light stops play: Durham v. Essex

Polo at Windsor

Linda France

This is the ritual. This is the game.
There are many rules. The sun will shine.
All thoroughbreds are equal, some more
equal than others. You will be well-trained,
well-groomed. You must always look your best.
Toss your head and snort a stream of gorgeous
vowels. You may not be awfully bright,
but what you've got is class, the sheen
of sterling across your silken flanks.

You will be fed and watered at someone
else's expense on the close-clipped lawn,
till you feel the adrenalin course
through your veins, like Pimms, like champagne,
the muddy sapphire of blood. Bare your teeth,
coast, thunder, twist, foul. Darling, your life's
at stake. How many minutes of glory
while the shutters whirr, the mallets click?
Main player, you won't be ridden roughshod.

And if you're lucky, if you're a winner,
the Queen of England will stroke you
with her gloved hand. You can take home
a Cartier bauble with your aching legs,
your splitting head. Don't fret if you're hot
and steamy at the end of the day;
there'll always be someone to put you back
in your box, strip you off and bed you down.
That is the ritual. That is the game.

Three Boring Miles on the Exercise Bike

Ian McMillan

Three boring miles. The television flickering
in the corner of my eye. A man talking.

The view doesn't alter, of course. The rain
coming down steadily, Joe's grandma

taking him down to school, coming back again.
Mile one. The speedometer hovering

around twelve. So in an hour I could be
almost in Sheffield, halfway to Leeds,

my legs going slowly, slowly, going nowhere,
my wife lifting the same cup of coffee

to her lips for mile after mile, the steam
pulling away from the cup like smoke,

a man talking. It's me, saying the same things
over and over again. Mile two. The phone rings,

I pedal, my wife answers it again and again.
It's the same bad news, pulling away like smoke,

Joe's grandma taking him to school.
She waves this time. She waved last time.

Her glasses are the same as they have been for years.
My view doesn't change. A window of trees,

rain, Joe's grandma, my wife, the cup of coffee,
the telephone, the bad news, my legs going slowly,

slowly, in an hour I could be halfway to here,
almost into this room, the room pulling away

like smoke from a dying fire. Mile three.
The view doesn't alter. A man talking. It's me.