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To cite this article: Alfred Archer (2026) Football, luck and life, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 20:2, 249-255, DOI: [10.1080/17511321.2026.2640872](https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2026.2640872)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2026.2640872>



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Published online: 06 Mar 2026.



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ABSTRACT

This article builds upon Stephen Mumford's observations about football and chance in his book *Football: The Philosophy Behind the Game*. Mumford argues that football strikes a perfect balance between skill and chance. In football, the more skilled team generally wins but not always. Mumford argues that the chanciness of football is a core part of why it is so entertaining. Moreover, it can be a useful source of two important life lessons: that we never have full control over our lives and that victory can be possible even when the odds are stacked against us. In this commentary, I explore the connections between football and chance in more detail by drawing on the work of the experimental British novelist B. S. Johnson. I will argue that Johnson's work suggests three more lessons we can learn about life from attending to the chanciness of football. First, chance may lead events of major significance that may happen to us at any moment. Second, our lives may come to be defined by moments of pure chance over which we had no control. Third, we have a tendency to try to impose meaning on the random chaos of life at times where there is no meaning to be found.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 February 2026
Accepted 28 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Luck; football; chance; B.S. Johnson; Stephen Mumford

In his wonderful book *Football: The philosophy behind the game*, Stephen Mumford devotes a chapter to exploring the connections between football and chance. Part of what makes football such a fantastic sport, according to Mumford, is that it seems to involve the perfect balance between skill and chance (Mumford 2019, 100). In football, having a better team usually means that you will win the match, but it does not guarantee it. Mumford also claims that the luck involved in football provides useful lessons for thinking about life more generally. In this commentary, I explore the connections between football and chance in more detail by drawing on the work of the experimental British novelist B. S. Johnson. I begin by examining Mumford's own account of what we can learn about life and chance through playing and watching football, before building on this account by examining some of Johnson's reflections on luck, football and meaning in his novel *The unfortunates*.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Mumford on football and chance

Part of the appeal of football is the great underdog performances where a much weaker group of players pulls off a fantastic win against a team of stronger players. In the history of the Men's World Cup, for example, there is Senegal's incredible 1–0 win over holders France in their first-ever match at the finals in 2002. Another famous example was Cameroon's 1–0 win over an Argentina team featuring Diego Maradona, in which the 38-year-old Roger Milla stole the show. More recently, Saudi Arabia's sensational 2–1 win over eventual winners, Argentina, in the 2022 World Cup, was described by the sports data group Gracenote as the biggest upset in World Cup history, having given the Saudis only an 8.7% chance of victory (Howorth 2022).

Some argue that the fact that the best team does not always win is a flaw that sports should seek to rectify (Kretchmar 2005).¹ Mumford (2019, 90), though, argues that the chanciness of football is part of what makes football such a valuable sport. Mumford identifies several reasons why the chanciness of football contributes to its value. Most obviously, the chanciness of football makes it more entertaining (Mumford 2019, 90). That we cannot know who will win the game with any certainty, even when one team has more talented players, makes the game more exciting to watch.

But Mumford also thinks that the chanciness of football makes it a useful source of two important life lessons. In football, players and coaches lack full control over the outcome of a match. The same is true of life. As Mumford puts it, 'You cannot control everything that happens to you, or guarantee that you will get the rewards that you deserve' (Mumford 2019, 102).

The second lesson that the chanciness of football can teach us is that victory is sometimes possible if you give your best efforts, even when the odds are stacked against you (Mumford 2019, 102). These are, of course, closely related lessons about the chanciness of life. We cannot guarantee that we will succeed in life, even when everything appears to be in our favour and we are trying our best. However, there can be a chance of success even when the chances of success seem very remote.

While I do not disagree with Mumford's claims about the chanciness of football being a useful source of life lessons, I think there is more to be said here. To further develop this idea of what we can learn about life from the chanciness of football, I will now turn to a perhaps unexpected source.

Football, chance and *The unfortunates*

Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933–1973) was an experimental English novelist, poet, critic and journalist, who famously claimed that writing fiction is 'telling lies' (Johnson 1973, 14). To subsidise his career as a novelist, Johnson wrote newspaper reports of football matches for *The Observer*. He draws on this experience in his most famous (and infamous) novel, *The unfortunates*. Given Johnson's aversion to fiction, it is perhaps no surprise that this novel is not a work of fiction but rather more of a memoir of Johnson's grief for his friend, Tony Tillinghast, who had died of cancer at the age of twenty-nine. The novel is an interior monologue of a sports reporter, who quite explicitly is Johnson himself, arriving at a city to cover a football match and realising that it is the city where his friend Tony lived as

a postgraduate student. The novel recounts Johnson's experiences while reporting on the match, while reflecting on his memories of his friend and his own grief.

This may sound like a conventional grief memoir, but there is one important experimental feature of this book: it is written in twenty-seven separately bound chapters contained in a box. While there is one chapter entitled 'First' and another entitled 'Last', to be read first and last, the remaining twenty-five chapters are intended to be read in any order.² Novelist Jonathan Coe explains in his biography of Johnson that the idea behind this was that this would serve: 'as a tangible metaphor for the random interplay of memories and impressions in the human mind and also, let us not forget, for football itself, where the play proceeds randomly within a framework of rules and conventions' (Coe (2004)). As Johnson's friend, Zulfikar Ghose, explained in an email to Coe, Johnson's novel was deliberately designed to convey the randomness of life, death and disease through the random order of the chapters, the randomness of the assignment to city where his friend had lived and through the analogy with football, a game in which chance plays a major role (Coe 2004, 230). As Coe observes, this last part fits with 'Johnson's sense of football as a paradigm of (to use his own favourite terminology) "the human condition"' (Coe 2004, 213).

What might we learn then about chance and the human condition through reflecting on the role of chance in football? The first point to take from Johnson is related to Mumford's observation that the chanciness of football adds to its entertainment value. While Mumford's focus is on the uncertainty of who will win the match, Johnson focuses instead on the uncertainty of the quality and significance of the match. As he describes:

Always, at the start of each match, the excitement, often the only moment of excitement, that this might be the one match, the match in which someone betters Payne's ten goals, where Hughie Gallacher after being floored nods one in while sitting down, where the extraordinary happens, something that makes it stand out, the match one remembers and talks about for years afterwards, the rest of one's life. The one moment, the one match. A new beginning is it? (Johnson 1999[1969], 'The pitch', 1)

Because chance plays such a major role in football, we do not know before a match whether we are about to witness a match of great significance or not. Of course, some matches will count as significant regardless of what occurs. A World Cup Final is majorly significant, regardless of what happens. For most games, though, such as a regular league match of the kind Johnson was reporting on, the match will have no great significance unless something exceptional occurs. But for all we know at the start of any match, this match could be the match where something remarkable happens.

We don't have to look far for examples to support Johnson's point. For example, almost no one would have predicted Senegal's amazing upset against France in 2002. Similarly, while a World Cup semi-final will always be significant, no one would have predicted in 2014 that the match between Brazil and Germany would involve such a historic humiliation of Brazil that the match would acquire two different names (it is known both by its scoreline 7–1 and as the Agony of Mineirão, as it was played at the Mineirão stadium). To give a non-World Cup example, the match between Motherwell and Hibernians in the Scottish Premier League in May 2010 would have seemed, before the match, to be a regular league game, significant only because it could play a significant role in determining who would qualify for the Europa League in the following season. However, it

turned out to be arguably the most exciting game in Scottish League history and undeniably the highest scoring. At one point, Hibernians led 4–1. Later, they led 6–2. Yet, the match finished in a 6–6 draw, with Motherwell’s Lukas Jutkiewicz scoring an incredible equalising goal three minutes into injury time that his manager compared to Marco van Basten’s famous goal for the Netherlands in the 1988 European Championship Final against the Soviet Union. If this was not remarkable enough, the equaliser came just six minutes after Motherwell had missed a chance to equalise from a penalty that was saved by Hibernian goalkeeper Graeme Smith. Chance makes football exciting, then, not just because of the uncertainty of the result but also because any match we watch could turn out to be a match of historic significance that people will talk about for years to come.

The life lesson we can take from this is that we can never know when the most momentous moments in our lives are likely to occur. Like with football, there may be some events that we can be confident of their significance. For a footballer, playing in a World Cup final is likely to be a major event in their life story, while for a musician, an orchestral debut at the Proms might play a similar role. But there will also be people for whom the most significant moments of their lives may happen when they are not expecting them. Think, for example, of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim*, in which the central character spends his whole life fantasising about being a hero but fails to recognise the opportunity for heroism when it arises (Conrad 1900). What we can learn from football is that chance may lead events of major significance to happen to us at any moment.

The second lesson we can learn from Johnson’s reflections is that chance can play a major role in determining the stories that are told about an event or even a life. In the match Johnson is reporting on, a defender decides to intervene on a shot on goal, but by doing so, sends the ball looping past his own goalkeeper and into the net. As Johnson describes this moment, ‘that’s the match, that’s the story’ (Johnson 1999[1969], ‘The pitch’, 8–9). In this case, the chance moment determines only the story of a match. But in an unpublished poem titled ‘World Cup Shot’, Johnson suggests that chance can also determine how an entire career is remembered:

I must have seen it forty times:
 Taking the ball past one, another,
 Stumbling, recovering, scoring
 Always I want the defeated full back
 to stop him
 Ah, the chances let slip!
 (Reprinted in Coe 2004, 213).

While not fully explicit, Johnson’s poem suggests how one moment of chance can determine an entire career. The way Johnson wills the full back to stop the attacker despite knowing he won’t suggests an appreciation of the magnitude of this moment for the defender’s career and the way he will forever see it as a chance let slip.

Football has a cruel way of defining entire careers in unfortunate moments, particularly at World Cups. Think, for example, of Roberto Baggio’s decisive missed penalty in the penalty shootout of the 1994 World Cup Final. While Baggio was an incredible player with a long and distinguished career, the moment he is most remembered for is this missed penalty. Baggio only missed a couple of penalties in his career and made his decision

about where to place his kick based on a carefully thought-out analysis of Brazil goalkeeper Cláudio Taffarel (Baggio 2002). Unfortunately for Baggio, he mishit his shot and blazed it over the bar. As journalist Miguel Delaney writes, while it is no doubt ‘harsh’, it is also the case that ‘a player of such brilliance has been so defined by one moment of failure’ (Delaney 2017).³

Here, we have another useful lesson for life. We may not be able to control the moments that come to define our lives, at least the meaning that our lives have for most other people. Through no fault of our own, the most defining moment of our lives may be something that we have no control over. Think, for instance, of someone who is temporarily blinded by a flash of light while driving and crashes into and kills a motorcyclist as a result.⁴ Such an event may be a major defining moment in their life, despite the fact that it was purely down to bad luck. Just as a footballer’s career may be defined by one crucial slip or miskick, so too may the lives of non-footballers come to be defined by moments of pure chance.

The final related lesson we can draw from Johnson’s work has to do with the way we strive to find meaning in or even impose meaning onto chaotic, random events. Here, the football match in Johnson’s novel and Johnson’s attempt to create a narrative out of it serve as a general background for his reflections on his friend Tony’s attempts to impose meaning and narrative on his own illness. Johnson recalls an event when Tony’s wife, June, had a complication during childbirth and Tony had to go home without seeing her, believing that she might be dead. Johnson speculates that this may have contributed to Tony’s illness:

[D]id he in that moment, under that duress, decide he did not want to live, did something inside him decide, some organism, was something set in motion, irrevocably, irremediable? That is fanciful, perhaps, they would call it that, the medical people, and unscientific, of course, how could it have started it, no, but Tony believed it had something to do with it, he seemed sure, said so to me, it was not just looking for a reason, or was it? For him it was too much to believe that there was no reason, not for me, it is all chaos, I accept that as a state of the world, of things, of the human condition, yes, meaningless it is, pointless, but for Tony? Perhaps he had to believe there was a cause, intellectually, he had to satisfy himself by ratiocination, not believe it was just random, arbitrary, gratuitous, or he could not have gone on, could not have held out hope for himself, though it was pointless, anyway, whether he held hope or not, in the end. (Johnson 1999[1969], ‘Just as’, 2–3)

Here, Johnson describes Tony’s attempt to impose some kind of meaning on his illness, one which makes him in part responsible for what happened to him. This worry about imposing meaning on meaningless chaos appears several times in the novel. At one time, Johnson claims, ‘anything means something only if you impose meaning on it, which in itself is a meaningless thing, the imposition’ (Johnson 1999[1969], ‘Away from’, 3) while at another he wonders if it can even make sense to talk about meaningfulness or meaninglessness in relation to death (Johnson 1999[1969], ‘Last’, 4).

This we can see as an instance of what the philosopher Peter Goldie describes as our fictionalising tendencies. First is a desire to find agency where there is none. In attributing his illness to his own giving up on life, Tony would be attributing agency to himself over an outcome that presumably he had no control over. As Goldie points out, what is wrong with this tendency is that it misrepresents the world (Goldie 2012, 162). The second is a desire for narrative closure. As Goldie describes: ‘The simple fact about life is that “stuff

happens". Life is messy and to seek a narrative that neatly ties all the ends together has the potential of being dangerously blocking to the possibility of emotional closure, or being dangerously self-deceptive, and deceptive of others' (Goldie 2012, 167). The reason Goldie (2012, 172) gives for these and other fictionalising tendencies is that it is a way of avoiding the more horrific conclusion that many of the most significant events in our lives happen for no reason; they are simply the result of what philosopher Frank Kermode calls 'the monstrous world of contingency' (Kermode 1967, 136). We recoil in horror at the idea that there may be no reason for the tragedies that befall us, and so attribute agency and attempt to find narrative closure in situations where neither is present.

What the chanciness of football might help us recognise is that sometimes stuff happens to us for no reason that has a major impact on our lives. Learning to live with this rather than trying to find a reason where none exists is one of the major challenges of both football and life. This challenge is one many fans fail, responding to defeat with a fatalism that suggests that losing was inevitable from the start. As cultural studies theorist Cyprian Piskurek claims, 'Fatalism and the expectation of defeat are generically written into football' (Piskurek 2018, 263). This is one way in which people may fail to recognise the chaos and randomness of football and of life.

Concluding remarks

I have sought to build on Mumford's observations about the chanciness of football, providing useful lessons for life. Mumford claims that football can teach us that we cannot guarantee success in life, even when we appear to be in a favourable position, but likewise, even when the odds are against us, we may still have some chance of success. While not disagreeing with these claims, I think there is more that the chanciness of football can teach us about life. First, chance may lead events of major significance that may happen to us at any moment. Second, our lives may come to be defined by moments of pure chance over which we had no control. Third, we have a tendency to try to impose meaning on the random chaos of life at times where there is no meaning to be found.

The tendency to overlook the contingency of life is worth bearing in mind as we approach the World Cup. When major footballing nations get knocked out, this is often accompanied by widespread recriminations and soul-searching in the national press. Where exactly did the team go wrong? Was it the fault of the manager or the players? Or is it the football association's fault for failing to approach youth development in the right way? Is it young people's fault for spending too much time on their PlayStations or their phones and not enough time playing football? Do the press or the fans deserve the blame for being overly confident ahead of the tournament? All of these may be legitimate questions to ask, and answering them may help people find the cause for the team's failure. But it is also worth remembering that the cause of the defeat might be none of these factors. It may simply be down to chance.

Notes

1. For further discussion, see Davis (2006) and Kretchmar (2008).
2. This makes citing page numbers difficult. I have responded to this challenge by citing the chapters by the opening two words of the chapter.

3. For a discussion of how players should feel in response to faultless misses such as this, see Wojtowicz (2019).
4. For a discussion of the role that regret should play in such cases, see Wojtowicz (2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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