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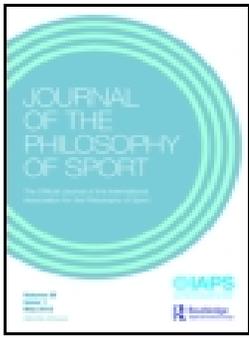


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A Conceptual Analysis of Clutch Performances in Competitive Sports

Darren Hibbs

The popular lore surrounding the history of any major competitive sport in America includes fabled episodes where “so-and-so came through in the clutch.” Competitors with a reputation for repeatedly succeeding “in the clutch” are celebrated as clutch performers. But the practice of classifying some players as “clutch” has also generated controversy. Much of the debate has been about the existence of clutch hitters in baseball. The dispute has centered on whether there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that some players are clutch hitters. Given the historical importance and popularity of statistical analyses in baseball, it is not surprising that baseball enthusiasts have shown a keen interest in the issue. Some baseball statisticians have argued that statistical analyses of hitting performances in Major League Baseball do not support the existence of clutch hitters (2; 3; 13). Others have argued that properly targeted statistical analyses do show that some players are clutch hitters (4; 17). A third position holds that the failure of statistical methods to detect clutch hitting does not constitute proof that clutch hitting is nonexistent. According to these statisticians, clutch hitting may be a skill that eludes the statistical methods employed to measure it (8). Yet another view is that the concept of a clutch hitter is incoherent. According to this argument, to assert that a player is a clutch hitter is to assert that a player is able to enhance his or her hitting ability in critical situations. A proponent of this view puts it this way:

How is it that a player who possesses the reflexes and the batting stroke and the knowledge and the experience to be a .260 hitter in other circumstances magically becomes a .300 hitter when the game is on the line? How does that happen (7: p. 31)¹

Statistical analyses are perhaps the best tool we have for determining who is or isn't a clutch performer—in baseball and other sports. However, despite the practicality of the statistical approach for detecting clutch performers, an analysis of what constitutes a clutch performance is not the target of these statistical approaches. That is, the discussion has not been shaped by an effort to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for individual clutch performances in general. Michael Martin and Warren Fraleigh have addressed the issue of clutch hitting in baseball with the goal of producing an analytical definition of “clutch hitter” (5;

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10; 11). Martin and Fraleigh each produced definitions of clutch hitters that combined quantitative elements derived from the statistical debates and nonquantitative elements that identify the intrinsic qualities of clutch hitting. Although Martin and Fraleigh limit their discussion to clutch hitters in baseball, Fraleigh suggested that clutch hitting ought to be understood as a specific case of a more general ability to perform well in critical situations that is found in all competitive sports (5: p. 605). Fraleigh is right to point out that clutch hitting is akin to a general ability that is exemplified in all competitive sports. However, there is a distinction between the concept of ‘clutch ability’ and the concept of a “clutch performance.” The possession of clutch ability just means that one is notable for delivering clutch performances. But in order to assign clutch ability to a competitor, one must first know what a clutch performance is. To my knowledge, there are no systematic analyses of the generic features of individual clutch performances in competitive sports. My aim is to provide such an account. Although the primary goal of the analysis will be to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for clutch performances, I will conclude with some comments about how the resulting definition may impact the debate about the existence of clutch performers. Ultimately, the definition of a clutch performance presented here will support the view that properly targeted statistical analyses provide us with sufficient evidence for determining whether a competitor is a clutch performer.

The scope of the following analysis will be limited to actions performed by *individuals* in *competitive* sports.² Accordingly, the analysis will be based on performances by individuals that occur in sports such as baseball, golf³, basketball, tennis, soccer, and football.⁴

A necessary feature of a clutch performance is that it occurs during a critical situation in a competition. The circumstances in the contest when the shot occurs determine whether the performance is clutch. Thus, clutch performances presuppose clutch situations. For competitions that are timed, clutch situations typically occur when the score of the contest is close and there is not much time remaining in the competition. The amount of time required to make this determination will vary from sport to sport. Assuming the scores in the contests are close, a single play that occurs with two minutes remaining in a football game may be weighed much more heavily than a single possession with two minutes remaining in a basketball game. Due to the different rules governing these two sports, the expected number of possessions (opportunities to score and prevent scoring) in a two minute time span is significantly greater in basketball than in football. Clutch situations are junctures in a contest where the successes or failures of the participants have a significant impact on the outcome of the contest. Thus, a clutch situation (CS) may be defined as follows:

CS: A point in a competitive sport where the success or failure of the participants has a significant impact on the outcome of the contest.

Although this use of the term seems uncontroversial (there are obviously critical junctures in some competitions), there are further issues that deserve attention. To say that success or failure during a CS has a ‘significant’ impact on the outcome of a contest means that the participants’ performances are very likely, but not necessarily, determinative. For example, a kicker in a football game may make a

field goal with only 30 seconds left in the game to put his team in the lead by two points only to see the opposing team reply on the next possession with a field goal to win the contest. Both performances occurred in CSs, but only one was decisive.

However, it is not the case that CSs can occur only during the final moments of a timed competition. Suppose that two football teams with dominating defenses and anemic offenses are competing in severely adverse weather conditions after recording nine consecutive, decisive shutouts of their opponents. If the score is tied, a scoring opportunity in the third quarter of the game might be critical in determining the outcome of such a contest.⁵

In some cases the boundary between clutch and nonclutch situations is fuzzy. If a basketball game is tied with five seconds remaining in the contest, the critical nature of the situation is apparent. However, it may not be clear when the most recent noncritical moment in the contest occurred. In some cases, critical junctures are only identified after the moment has passed or the contest is completed. The result of a penalty kick early in a soccer match may be identified as a decisive moment from a postmatch perspective. Thus, there is a distinction between critical junctures that are identified contemporaneously and what might be called post hoc critical situations that are identified in hindsight. Regarding the issue of post hoc critical situations, the analysis of clutch performances below will demonstrate that the concept of a clutch performance *presupposes contemporaneous awareness* of the critical juncture of the competition. Thus, although there are some critical situations that can only be identified after the fact, these situations should not count as *clutch* situations.

What makes a performance a ‘clutch’ performance? A simple definition that seems to capture the notion of a clutch performance (*CP*) is as follows:

CP: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds during a *CS*.

Although this version approximates the use of the term in ordinary cases, a further qualification about the nature of the competitor’s success is required. Consider the following scenario. Suppose that a basketball game is tied with less than three seconds remaining in the contest. The circumstances count as a *CS* since the performances of the competitors at that time will very likely determine the outcome of the contest. Now suppose that team *A* inbounds the ball and an errant pass lands in the hands of a surprised, 6’10”, athletic member of team *B* standing under the goal. He proceeds to score an easy, uncontested basket and team *B* wins the game. His performance meets the *CP* criterion, but this performance is not regarded as clutch due to the fact that the action he performed was so simple that failure was only a remote possibility. Given these circumstances, the relevant member(s) of team *A* would be accused of ‘choking’ in a *CS*.⁶ Similarly, if a baseball game is tied in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and the bases loaded, a pitch that hits the batter and scores a winning run would result in the pitcher being blamed for an egregious blunder. The batter that was hit by the pitch would not be credited with a clutch performance because getting hit by the pitch required little or no effort on his part. Thus, if a successful performance during a clutch moment is very easy to achieve, the possibility of a clutch performance is ruled out, but the possibility of choking is introduced. Given this qualification, a revised definition

must include a condition which states that a clutch performance must include success at a challenging task (*CT*).

The identification of *CTs* will vary based on the required task, the skill level of the competitor, and the environmental conditions. What is challenging to one player may not be as challenging to another. For example, in professional football, kicking a 25 yard field goal under ideal atmospheric conditions would be a *CT* to a player with no kicking experience but routine for a professional kicker. But if the atmospheric conditions were sufficiently adverse, a field goal of that distance would be a *CT* for the professional kicker. Thus, the term ‘challenging’ must be parsed in accordance with the task, the conditions, and the skill level of the competitor. The distinction between *CTs* and non*CTs* is unclear in some cases. For example, for a professional golfer, a two inch tap-in putt in golf is not a *CT* but a thirty five foot putt is a *CT*. However, it may not be clear where to draw the line between the challenging and nonchallenging putting distances for a given player. A similar form of ambiguity also attends the classification of field goal distances in football, shots in basketball, strikes in soccer, and so on. However, in each sport, there are some tasks that are clearly challenging even to the most skilled competitor based upon the nature of the task itself, the conditions under which it must be performed, or both.

In competitions that involve the interplay between offensive and defensive participants, a *CT* also presupposes that the opponent (whether offensive or defensive) is making a genuine effort to score or prevent scoring. For example, hitting safely is a *CT* in professional baseball only if the pitcher is making a genuine effort to prevent the batter from hitting safely. If the pitcher simply throws an underhand, slow pitch across the plate, a professional hitter would not be credited with succeeding at a *CT* if he were to hit safely under such circumstances. This point applies *mutatis mutandis* to *CTs* in other sports that involve offensive and defensive transactions. Thus, for some *CTs*, it is necessary that the relevant participants in the competition are actively involved in making the task challenging. Based on these considerations, a revised definition of *CP* is:

*CP*²: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a *CT* during a *CS*.

Although *CP*² captures two necessary components of a clutch performance, further qualifications are required. The definition ought to exclude challenging but irrelevant achievements during *CSs*. For example, suppose that on the final hole of a golf tournament a player who is tied for the lead is about to execute a putt that will determine whether she wins the tournament. Now suppose that as she walks around the green analyzing her putt, her thoughts drift to possible solutions to Russell’s Paradox and she succeeds at developing a formal strategy for resolving the paradox. She has succeeded at a *CT* during a *CS*, but this is clearly not what is meant by a clutch performance. Clutch performances are successful executions of competition-related (*CR*) tasks. A *CR* task is either an attempt to improve one’s chances of scoring or to prevent the opponent from improving their chances of scoring as established by the rules of the sport. Thus, a condition must be added to the definition that specifies that the *CT* is related to an effort to win the competition (i.e., that a *CRCT*, or competition-related challenging task, is a necessary condition for a clutch performance).

*CP*³: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a *CRCT* during a *CS*.

*CP*³ supplies a further necessary condition for clutch performances, but the conjunction of these conditions is not sufficient for specifying the nature of clutch performances. Suppose the score of a baseball game is 7–6 in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and the bases loaded. The manager of the team at bat has inserted a pinch hitter. Now suppose that the pinch hitter believed that he would not see any action in this particular game. In fact, he was so confident that he would not be playing that he had been ingesting barbiturates for most of the day. Due to his impairment, when he approaches the plate he is ignorant of the game situation. That is, he is unaware that he is batting in a *CS*. When the first pitch is released, he hits safely and scores a run to win the game. Should this performance rate as a clutch performance? Given the fact that the player was unaware of the circumstances of the contest, his performance does *not* count as a clutch performance. To credit a player with a clutch performance is to credit a player with meeting a challenge that includes the potential psychological pressure of the situation. If the player is ignorant of the critical nature of the situation, it is absurd to credit him or her with successfully meeting the challenge of a pressure situation. Of course, if an observer were unaware of the facts about the mental state of the pinch hitter in this scenario, they would likely judge the performance to be clutch. But we are currently interested in the intrinsic features of a clutch performance, not what might cause observers to *believe* that a performance was clutch. Thus, a further condition is necessary which states that clutch performances require the awareness that one is performing in a *CS*. A revised definition is as follows:

*CP*⁴: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a *CRCT* during a *CS* and is aware that the performance occurs during a *CS*.

The addition of this component obviates the aforementioned post hoc critical situations. If a game situation is only known to be critical for the outcome of a contest after the fact, it is not the case that the competitors were aware of the *CS* and the possibility of a clutch performance is ruled out. But this raises further questions about the psychological requirements for clutch performances. Consider the following two baseball scenarios. For both scenarios, the game conditions are the same as those in the previous example: the score is 7–6 with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning and a pinch hitter is at the plate. In scenario 1, pinch hitter *A* is a sophisticated android that is capable of understanding the circumstances of the competition in a way that is similar to a typical human being's understanding of the situation. That is, *A* understands that what happens during this episode has a significant chance of determining the outcome of the contest. Thus, *A* is *not* like the stoned batter mentioned in the prelude to *CP*⁴ because *A* is *aware* of the game situation. However, *A* has been engineered in such a way that it lacks the capacity to feel emotions of any kind. *A* cannot possibly feel anything similar to the psychological stress that affects human beings and is therefore incapable of experiencing the 'butterflies' that may accompany emotionally charged situations in competitive sports. Now suppose that *A* is engineered to be an excellent hitter and hits safely to win the game. Scenario 2 includes the same game situation, but pinch hitter *H* is an ordinary human being. Suppose that *H* is aware of

the facts concerning the game situation and is nervous because of the critical nature of the situation. Although he is anxious, he struggles to maintain his focus on the pitcher's likely choice of pitch and the mechanics of his own swing motion. *H* succeeds in maintaining his focus and hits safely to win the game. Both scenarios meet the *CP*⁴ criteria of a clutch performance. However, since *A* is *necessarily incapable* of feeling pressure, *A* cannot be credited with a clutch performance. Clutch performances can only occur in *CS*s. *CS*s are necessary platforms for clutch performances because of the psychological challenge presented by those circumstances. Clutch performances require that a competitor succeeded despite the *possibility* of failure specifically due to the ruinous effects of psychological stress in a *CS*.

But there are further nuances to this issue. Consider another scenario (while maintaining the same circumstances of the game in the previous two cases) where pinch hitter *H'* is, like *H*, an ordinary human being. But unlike *H*, *H'* does not feel any stress while at bat. *H'* is fully aware of the circumstances and understands that the outcome of the game very likely depends upon his performance at the plate. However, *H'* experiences no anxiety about performing under these circumstances and hits safely to win the game. Both *H'* and *A* do not feel any psychological stress, but unlike *A*, *H'* is a specimen of a kind that is *capable* of feeling pressure. *H'* may suffer from aerophobia and undergo tremendous agony during flights to and from game venues, but he simply does not become anxious during ball games. Should *H'*'s performance be classified as a clutch performance? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to determine *why* *H'* is not feeling any stress. That *H'* doesn't feel nervous could be explained in a variety of ways. Some of these explanations are consistent with clutch performances and others are not. For example, *H'* may not feel any stress or pressure because he is adept at maintaining his focus on the proper execution of the task at hand when he faces a *CS*. If this is the case, *H'* should be credited with a clutch performance. The ability to maintain focus under pressure is a hallmark of a clutch performer. However, *H'* may not feel any pressure because he is severely depressed or under the influence of drugs to the extent that he is *incapable of caring* about what happens while at bat.⁸ The absence of psychological stress is inconsistent with clutch performances if it is caused by mental illness or drug-induced apathy. If *H'* is incapable of feeling stress due to severe depression or the influence of drugs, then *H'* is similar to *A* and ought to be evaluated in the same manner. Part of what it means to perform in a clutch manner is that the competitor faces a genuine psychological challenge due to their knowledge of the circumstances *and* the fact that they *care* about the outcome. Caring about the outcome contributes to the possibility of psychological stress associated with the situation. Thus, this point ought to be extended to cover cases where a competitor does not feel pressure due to bare apathy that is not caused by either disease or drugs. If *H'* simply does not care about the outcome of the contest, his performance would not be regarded as clutch because an essential part of the challenge posed by a *CS* is absent. If there is no psychological challenge to overcome, one cannot be credited with overcoming it. But caring about the outcome of the contest does not necessarily entail that the competitor must actually feel debilitating pressure or stress. If *H'* is aware that fear is impending and he makes an effort to focus his mind in such a way that the fear does not adversely affect his performance, then he will be regarded as someone who successfully met the psychologi-

cal challenge of the *CS*. Thus, clutch performances require that the competitor cares about the outcome of the contest and is subject to the *possibility* of experiencing clutch-related stress. This point is related to the condition introduced in *CP*²—some tasks are challenging only if the relevant participants care about the outcome of the contest. Incorporating these conditions results in the following definition:

*CP*⁵: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a CRCT during a *CS*, is aware that the performance occurs during a *CS*, possesses the capacity to experience *CS*-related stress, and cares about the outcome of the contest.

These conditions capture the necessary psychological elements of clutch performances, but *CP*⁵ is insufficient for capturing another important element of clutch performances. Consider the following scenario in a golf tournament. Suppose that a golfer in the final group on the final hole of a tournament needs to hole a 210 yard second shot on a par 4 to win the tournament outright. She carefully analyzes the shot and decides to try to hit the ball onto the front of the green and roll it toward the hole. She strikes the ball and it ricochets off a tree standing 30 yards to the right of the green and rolls into the hole for an eagle and the win. Assuming that the golfer satisfies the psychological requirements of *CP*⁵, this performance should rate as a clutch performance. But it is not an example of a clutch performance. A shot of this sort ought to be categorized as a lucky shot rather than a clutch shot. When we assert that an athlete succeeds due to good luck (or fails due to bad luck), we usually mean that something other than their skill played a decisive role in the result of their performance. The ‘something other’ is not within the control of the competitor.⁹ In the scenario above, the golfer cannot be credited with controlling the path of the ball after it struck the tree. When we attribute a clutch performance to a competitor, we assert that the successful outcome of their performance is due largely to their skill.

However, in some cases the combination of skill and luck involved with a successful performance leads to difficulty in specifying clearly whether luck is the predominate explanation for the success. Suppose that the golfer in the previous scenario hits the shot as she had envisioned and the ball lands on the front of the green and rolls on a path that will send it barely to the right of the hole. However, as the ball approaches the vicinity of the hole it nudges to the left after hitting a twig and falls into the hole for the eagle and the win. Classifying the shot as lucky seems defensible since the fortuitous position of the twig is partly responsible for the win. However, it also seems reasonable to conclude that the shot was clutch because a fantastic, skillful shot was necessary to benefit from the position of the twig. This raises a question about how much luck is required to rule out a performance as clutch. If getting lucky depends upon the presence of favorable environmental conditions that are not within the control of the competitor (e.g., the twig), then every successful performance requires some luck. Whenever competitors make an effort to hit a golf shot, shoot a basketball, kick a soccer ball, throw a football, etc., they are assuming that certain environmental conditions obtain. For sports that are played outdoors, the atmospheric conditions may change unexpectedly, a bird might fly into a ball in flight, or some other unexpected change in the conditions could impact (for good or ill) the outcome of a competitor’s effort.

Whether the expected conditions actually obtain is not within the control of the competitor, therefore their success or failure depends partly upon factors that are not within their control—i.e., luck. Although this entails that luck is necessarily part of successful performances, it does not entail that performances cannot be distinguished on the basis of the degree of influence that luck has on the success of a performance. The previous golfing scenarios demonstrate that we can distinguish between golf shots that are unequivocally lucky and those that may or may not be lucky. Similarly, we can distinguish both of those cases from a third scenario where a golfer meets the *CP*⁵ criteria and sinks a twelve foot putt to win a tournament without any extraordinary assistance from debris, wind, etc. In the latter case, we would have no reason to attribute the success of the shot predominately to luck rather than skill. Luck, therefore, is similar to other clutch-related concepts such as ‘challenging task’ and ‘critical situation’ in that not all cases can be definitively classified. But a condition ruling out luck as the primary explanation of the success of a performance is necessary. A revised version of *CP* is as follows:

*CP*⁶: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a *CRCT* during a *CS*, is aware that the performance occurs during a *CS*, possesses the capacity to experience *CS*-related stress, cares about the outcome of the contest, and succeeds primarily due to skill rather than luck.

*CP*⁶ captures what is usually meant when we attribute a clutch performance to a competitor in sports, but it does not include a proviso regarding compliance with the relevant rules that is essential to clutch performances. For the issue at hand, what matters is whether noncompliance with the rules nullifies the possibility of a clutch performance. Consider the following scenario in a golf tournament. A golfer is on the last hole of a USGA tournament and is tied for the lead. The final hole is a formidable 520-yard par 4, so the golfer needs to complete the hole in three strokes to win the tournament outright and avoid a playoff. Now suppose that the golfer’s longest drives are usually around 250 yards. Given this limitation, he has no reasonable chance of scoring a birdie on a hole of this length. However, he decides to mitigate the circumstances by selecting an illegal club and an illegal ball from his bag.¹⁰ Both the club and the ball are prohibited under USGA rules because they are designed to (and do) considerably increase the distance of golf shots. The golfer hits two consecutive shots that put the ball next to the green and he chips in to win the tournament. Despite the fact that this feat was difficult and required considerable skill, it should not be counted as a clutch performance since the golfer had no reasonable chance of success if he had complied with the rules. When a clutch performance is attributed to a competitor, it is assumed that he or she did not violate the rules of the game in such a way that the violation contributed significantly to their success. Accordingly, if a rules violation results in a significant competitive advantage vis-à-vis compliance with the rules, then a performance that meets the *CP*⁶ criteria should not be counted as a clutch performance.

Note that this is only the case if noncompliance is sufficiently advantageous compared with compliance. There are cases where rules violations may lead to conflicting intuitions about whether the violation amounts to a clutch-nullifying

advantage. For example, some Major League baseball players have been accused of using corked bats in order to enhance their batting results. Although corked bats are illegal in Major League Baseball, there is no conclusive scientific evidence to support the claim that corked bats contribute greater speed or distance to a batted ball compared with a regulation bat (1: pp. 136–139). Since a corked bat is lighter and therefore easier to swing, the modification may make it easier to control the bat, but the reduced mass of the bat does not increase the distance of a batted ball.¹¹ Thus, if a batter were to hit a home run to win a game using a corked bat under *CP*⁶ conditions, intuitions may justifiably conflict about whether the performance ought to be counted as clutch.

There are other cases where rules violations are clearly not clutch-nullifying. Suppose that a sport bans two classes of substances. Substance class *P* includes performance-enhancing drugs and substance class *M* includes drugs that mask the presence of *P* class drugs but have no performance-enhancing properties. If a competitor ingests an *M* class substance only, they have violated the rules. But the use of *M* class drugs is compatible with a clutch performance since this has no impact on the difficulty of a competition-related task or a competitor's ability to succeed at it. That is, there is no relevant difference between a successful performance with an *M* class substance in the player's system and a performance where the player is in compliance with the ban.

The difference between cases where rules violations preclude clutch performances and cases where they do not lies in the type of rule that is violated. What matters is whether the rule that is violated results in a significant advantage compared with compliance with the rules. We can introduce some clarity on this issue by way of the following stipulations. Clutch-nullifying rules violations are cases of 'cheating'. Cases of cheating are a subset of rules violations in general. Clutch performances are compatible with some rules violations, but not with cheating. Cheating occurs when a competitor violates the rules in such a way that their chance of success is significantly greater compared with their chance when complying with the rules. A revised version of *CP* that incorporates this condition is as follows:

*CP*⁷: When a participant in a competitive sport succeeds at a *CRCT* during a *CS*, is aware that the performance occurs during a *CS*, possesses the capacity to experience *CS*-related stress, cares about the outcome of the contest, and succeeds primarily due to skill rather than luck or cheating.

I submit that *CP*⁷ specifies the essential features of individual clutch performances in competitive sports. Each condition in *CP*⁷ is a necessary component of clutch performances and the conjunction of these conditions is sufficient for classifying a performance as clutch. Given this definition of clutch performances, the implications for some of the issues raised earlier can be addressed.

How would this definition of a clutch performance impact the debate over the possibility of clutch performers over time? The first thing to note is that the concept of a clutch performance, or a series of clutch performances, is not logically incoherent. That is, clutch performances, either singly or in a series, do not require a competitor to magically transcend his or her abilities. Clutch performances are not preternatural events, but cases where a competitor manages to perform in

accordance with their ability despite the pressure associated with the circumstances of a clutch moment. To assert that a player is clutch is to express confidence that the competitor is likely to succeed in critical situations. But how is this confidence grounded? Usually, a single clutch performance does not confer upon the competitor the distinction of being a clutch performer—particularly when the competitor is regarded as a choker based on past performances. But competitors that have only a few clutch performances to their credit are often esteemed for their clutch ability if their successes occur in high profile competitions. This is due in large part to the inflated psychological effect of successes during competitions at the highest level of a popular sport. If a baseball player has two game-winning home runs in the MLB World Series, he will likely be deemed a clutch player—again, provided there is no history of choking in big games that overshadows the successes. This may be the case even if the statistics show a poor batting average in clutch situations throughout the season. Previous failures are quickly forgotten if the player succeeds in more than one critical situation with a championship on the line. Conversely, if a batter has a high batting average in critical situations throughout the regular season but chokes on more than one occasion in the World Series, he will likely be categorized as a choker rather than a clutch hitter.¹² This point applies to performances in other sports as well. The weight attributed to performances in high profile competitions is a consequence of the influence the magnitude of the competition has on some features of *CP*⁷. The potential for competition-related stress may increase in major competitions and the effort and skill-level of opponents may amplify the degree of difficulty of competition-related tasks. These considerations may explain the ongoing dispute between statisticians who reject the existence of clutch performers and fans that are quite certain that their heroes are more likely to succeed than fail in clutch situations. The psychological impact of seeing a few examples of successful performances in prestigious competitions trumps the statistical arguments that demonstrate a player's mediocrity in clutch situations.

This 'big game' bias frustrates critics who argue that competitors who are popularly regarded as clutch performers do not possess statistical histories that validate their clutch status. The assertion that a performer is clutch is usually not a product of careful statistical analysis; it is most often grounded in a small sample of a player's total performances in clutch situations that are notable successes. If the assertion that a player is clutch is to be invested with a less capricious provenance, a reasonable starting point is to specify what should count as a clutch performance and then develop a sport-specific method of tracking the performances of competitors in the relevant circumstances.

With respect to the statistical models that are used to detect clutch performers, their target should obviously be those aspects of a *CP* that are quantifiable. This is already done with respect to the models used in the debate about clutch hitters in baseball. However, one of the statistical arguments in favor of clutch hitters employs the notion of 'hidden clutch' situations (17). Hidden clutch situations are equivalent to the notion of a 'post hoc' critical situation discussed above where a competitor is not contemporaneously aware of a clutch situation.¹³ Since a necessary condition for a clutch performance requires the awareness that one is facing a *CS*, statistical analyses of this sort are not properly targeted. The 'hidden clutch' method may identify players that positively influence the number of wins

over the long run, but that is not identical to identifying clutch performers since a player may contribute significantly to wins without ever succeeding during (or encountering) a *CS*.

How should we regard our epistemic predicament with respect to verifying that a performance meets the *CP*⁷ standard for clutch performances? The most conspicuous difficulty is related to the private psychological facts associated with clutch performances as defined in *CP*⁷. How could an observer know that a given competitor is aware of the game situation, cares about the outcome of their performance, and that their success is the result of a focused effort to exemplify a skill rather than luck? Since our only access to this information is through observation and the testimony of the competitors, the invitation for skepticism is apparent. In addition, there is the issue of ambiguity. The conditions that comprise *CP*⁷ lack precision to the extent that, even under ideal epistemic circumstances, we are not able to definitively classify some performances as clutch or not. That is, even if we knew every relevant fact about a given performance, reasonable arguments could be produced in support of contrary opinions about whether the performance was clutch.

There are two issues in connection with this point that deserve attention. The first is related to the epistemic standard one ought to employ in determining whether we can know whether a player is clutch. The considerations above presuppose a Cartesian standard of certainty which is excessively rigorous for the identification of clutch performers. There is no good reason to doubt that statistical models that are properly targeted, given the conditions of *CP*⁷, provide sufficient evidence for identifying clutch players. The deviant cases where performers are stoned, mentally ill, or cheating, are anomalous to the extent that we can only regard them as relevant when there is some evidence of these violations. Thus, in the absence of evidence that shows a player has violated some aspect(s) of *CP*⁷ in a statistically relevant manner, we ought to conclude that the statistical facts do provided us with sufficient grounds for regarding a player as clutch.

A second issue concerns the fact that the definition of a clutch performance above includes not only descriptive features but evaluative components that are bound up with normative aspects of sport (e.g., those having to do with the proper psychological state of the competitor, the influence of luck, and rules violations). The statistical analyses cited in this paper (exclusively related to baseball) are as far as possible focused on the purely descriptive, quantifiable aspects of performances. The divergent results are due to the different methods of identifying clutch situations and disagreements about sufficient sample sizes. Thus, the normative aspects of *CP*⁷ are not responsible for disagreements among the baseball statisticians. However, it is my contention that that the evaluative aspects of the concept are essential to the proper application of the concept. That is, the proper application of the term 'clutch' depends upon the normative or evaluative components of the concept as much as the purely descriptive components. The addition of the evaluative components to the definition may lead to disagreements about whether certain performances should count as clutch since clutch-nullifying degrees of cheating and luck are debatable, as are the requisite psychological factors. But this does not entail that no warranted judgment can be made about the clutch status of a given performer. If there is no evidence that a given competitor has violated the normative requirements for clutch performances, a sufficient

sample of statistical data that targets the quantifiable elements of CP^7 provides sufficient evidence for determining whether a given competitor ought to be regarded as a clutch performer.

Notes

1. Before his agnosticism (8), James was a skeptic about the existence of clutch hitters.
2. I will not discuss multiple performances by an individual over the course of a competition, team performances in competitive sports, nor will I discuss noncompetitive sports (e.g., recreational kayaking). Although clutch performances may occur during those types of activities, clutch performances are typically associated with individual performances in competitive sports. More importantly, the necessary and sufficient conditions for clutch performances within those domains may differ from those required for individual performances in competitive sports. For similar reasons, some individual performances in competitive sports will be excluded from the analysis. For example, clutch performances may occur in competitive sports that involve nonhuman animals (e.g., horse racing) or the use of sophisticated mechanical equipment (e.g., auto racing). Since these competitive sports involve animal behavior or complex machinery (and a significant degree of teamwork), the intrinsic features of clutch performances in these contexts may differ from the intrinsic features required for competitive sports that involve individual human participants only.
3. I am assuming that the use of sophisticated golfing equipment (and the advice of a caddy) is not equivalent (in terms of analytical requirements) to the use of pit crews and the accompanying mechanical equipment in auto racing.
4. The term *football* will be used to denote American football rather than soccer.
5. In competitions that are not timed (e.g., baseball and golf), CSs are identified in a similar fashion. If the scores of the contests are close, CSs are more likely to arise during the late innings of a baseball game or on the last few holes of a golf tournament. Given a close contest, the fewer the outs remaining for a baseball team or the fewer the holes remaining for a golfer, the more likely it is that a CS will arise. However, during baseball games that involve two dominating pitchers or golf tournaments that are held on extremely difficult courses, CSs need not occur very late in the contest since any opportunity to improve one's score may be rare.
6. Although the term "choke" is not the focus of the present inquiry, it is closely associated with the term clutch since both are necessarily related to clutch situations. For an explanation of various forms of choking, see Miller (12: pp. 11–34). Thanks to Clay Matthews for bringing Miller's analysis to my attention.
7. In their discussion of clutch hitters, Martin and Fraleigh take up a similar issue. Although it is not clear whether Fraleigh maintained that clutch hitters must actually feel the stress of the situation (5: p. 602), Martin argues that actually feeling psychological stress is not a necessary condition for clutch hitting. According to Martin, what matters is that the hitter *is aware* that he is in a clutch situation, not that he feels stress (10: p. 606). The awareness requirement in Martin's account amounts to the condition added in the creation of CP^4 above. However, Martin does not address the issue of why a competitor does not feel stress.
8. This case of drug-induced apathy is distinct from the drug-induced ignorance discussed before CP^3 . In this instance, the player is aware of the game situation but simply doesn't care about the outcome.
9. I employ a "control" theory of luck, but the distinction between skill and luck does not necessarily rely upon the accuracy of this theory. An alternative modal account of luck could also be employed. For an account of the control theory, see Greco (6). For an account of the modal theory, see Pritchard (14). For a critique of both the control and modal accounts, see Lackey (9).

10. The USGA rules require golf clubs and balls to meet certain requirements related to velocity and distance. See (18: appendices II and III).
11. Assuming cork is used. “Corked” refers to the use of any substance to modify the bat and some substances may not result in a lighter bat.
12. The point applies to nonhitters also. Bill Buckner is largely remembered for an error fielding a ground ball during game 6 of the 1986 World Series against the New York Mets. Despite an otherwise commendable career, Buckner’s error has played a disproportionate role in coloring his reputation as baseball player.
13. See the discussion following CP⁴.

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