

The Personal Interpretation of Football and Its Influence on Characters' Playstyles in *Blue Lock* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how characters in *Blue Lock* (2018) construct personal interpretations of football and how these interpretations influence their playstyles. Focusing on Isagi Yoichi, Rin Itoshi, and Bachira Meguru, this study applies Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics theory supported by Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory and Ronkainen and Ryba's narrative perspective to examine how the characters interpret football based on their experiences and motivations. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is also used to analyze how these meanings are represented through language, symbolic actions, and visual signs, while achievement goal theory by John G. Nicholls is used to explain how personal meaning influences playstyle and the characters' understanding of success. The findings show that each character develops a different meaning of football shaped by personal background, which later influences the way they approach football and perform on the field.

Keywords: football, hermeneutics, personal interpretation, playstyle, representation

INTRODUCTION

Manga has developed into one of the most widely consumed storytelling narratives from Japan that is received by global audiences. As a storytelling medium, manga offers a variety of genres that appeal to different audiences. One of the most popular genres among its many genres is sports manga which takes the second spot in the most popular manga genre (Bryce & Davis, 2010). Sports manga is usually associated with themes such as competition, ambition, rivalry, perseverance, and emotional struggle in competitive strategies. These elements help sports manga in appealing not only to sports enthusiasts, but also to audiences who enjoy character-driven narratives. One of the sports manga that gained major popularity in recent years is *Blue Lock*, written by Muneyuki Kaneshiro.

Unlike traditional sports manga that emphasize teamwork and friendship, *Blue Lock* introduces a different perspective to the genre by focusing on egoism, individual ambition, and competition. The story begins after Japan's failure in the 2018 FIFA World Cup that leads to the creation of the Blue Lock Project, a program designed to create the best striker in the world. Through the project, players compete against one another while redefining themselves as football players. Although the participants share the same objective, to become the best player in the world, each player develops a different understanding of football shaped by their personal experiences, motivations, and backgrounds. This different understanding later influences the way the characters approach football and perform on the field.

Several previous studies have discussed *Blue Lock* (2018) from different perspectives. De Guzman (2024) analyzes *Blue Lock* from a poststructuralist perspective by discussing how the series challenges conventional understandings of football and teamwork. Meanwhile, Raihan, Hizbullah, and Ghany (2025) focus on linguistic aspects by examining personal deixis in the Indonesian and Arabic versions of the manga. This study hopes to give an insight into how

sports narratives may represent the relationship between interpretation, self-expression, and athletic performance by focusing on how characters in *Blue Lock* construct different personal interpretations of football based on their backgrounds, experiences and motivations, and how these interpretations influence their playstyles.

METHOD

This study aims to analyze how Isagi Yoichi, Rin Itoshi, and Bachira Meguru construct their personal interpretations of football and how these interpretations influence their playstyles. The study uses qualitative textual and visual analysis taken from the *Blue Lock* manga (2018) from Chapter 1 to Chapter 285 or the Neo Egoist arc as its material. The study will only be focused on the three characters mentioned as the three characters have appeared most in the manga, which will help in the analysis. This study applies Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics theory (1975) as the main theory which is also supported by Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory (1984) and Ronkainen and Ryba's narrative perspective (2019), to examine how personal experiences construct the characters' understanding of football. Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997) is also used to support the main theory in showing how these meanings are represented through language, symbolic actions, and visual signs. Finally, achievement goal theory by John G. Nicholls (1984) supports the main theory in explaining how personal meaning influences motivation and performance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the study discusses how football is represented differently by Isagi Yoichi, Rin Itoshi, and Bachira Meguru based on their personal experiences, motivations, and relationships with other players. The three characters have different backgrounds, experience, and motivation, which results in a way of understanding football and the way it helps shape their playstyles. This results in the analysis being divided into three sections based on each character to examine how their personal interpretations of football influence their playstyles. The analysis begins with Isagi Yoichi, followed by Rin Itoshi and Bachira Meguru.

The Interpretation of Football for Isagi Yoichi and the Impact towards His Playstyle.

Isagi Yoichi interprets football as a platform to prove his self-worth, specifically from becoming the decisive player who determines the outcome of a match. This interpretation begins with his previous experience, in which Isagi hesitated to become the decisive player in a match, an experience that eventually shaped how he understood football after joining the Blue Lock Project. From the project, Isagi sees football as a place where he can prove his value through his contribution to victory rather than just a competitive sport. This interpretation later influences the way he plays, leading him to a devouring playstyle that emphasizes adaptability, calculation, and surpassing other players to become the decisive player inside the match.

Football as a Platform for Self-Worth

Isagi defines his self-worth based on his role in the success or failure of a football match. Because of this, he becomes determined to be a striker as strikers often play a decisive role in securing victory through scoring goals. This understanding becomes visible when Isagi declares, "I am a striker!" when entering the Blue Lock Project.



Figure 1: Isagi saying he is a striker
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 1, 2018

In Figure 1, Isagi's declaration represents his increased understanding of football through the role of a striker. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics theory (1975), meaning is shaped through personal experiences and interpretation. In Isagi's case, his previous defeat during his high school match affects the way he interprets football, especially in him changing his belief to become the decisive player is the way to prove his worth. From Hall's theory of representation (1997), Isagi's statement functions as a linguistic sign that represents his commitment to football, while his determined facial expression reinforces his motivation to prove himself in the field. Isagi's determination to be a striker and his understanding of football is influenced by Jinpachi Ego's speech about the role of striker before opening the Blue Lock Project.

Isagi's interpretation of football was affected while he was listening to Ego's speech. From the speech, Isagi reflects on his previous defeat and begins to reinterpret football through the role of a striker. Ricoeur (1984) explains that individuals understand experiences by connecting past experiences, present understanding, and future aspirations into a narrative. In Isagi's case, his previous failure gives him new meaning after Ego's speech, influencing his aspiration to become the decisive player capable of achieving victory. Ronkainen and Ryba (2019) further explain that athletes often construct their identity through meaningful sporting experiences, which can also be seen from Isagi's changing perspective toward football. Isagi's reaction to his success in matches can be seen as his understanding of football as a platform for self-worth. One moment is when he successfully outplayed Michael Kaiser, where Isagi openly mocks him by saying, "How does it feel to be the clown of my story?"



Figure 2: Isagi showing off to Kaiser after completing his play
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 202, 2023

Figure 2 shows how Isagi measures his self-worth through outperforming others. According to Nicholls' achievement goal theory (1984), ego-oriented individuals define success through surpassing competitors which can be seen as Isagi feels successful after outplaying Kaiser and goes above and beyond to call him a clown. Isagi's statement and expression positions him as the central figure of the match, showing that success in football strengthens the self-worth he tries to achieve. However, Isagi reacts differently when he fails to become the decisive player inside a match, particularly when Kunigami, a fellow teammate in his team, steals the goal Isagi has carefully planned to score.



Figure 3: Isagi frustrated with himself after his goal was stolen
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 185, 2022

Figure 3 shows a rupture in Isagi's understanding of football. Since Isagi measures his value from becoming the hero of a match, losing the opportunity to score threatens Isagi's self-worth that he tries to establish through football. Isagi's frustrated expression and aggressive language represent his disappointment and wounded pride and act as linguistic and visual signs. This shows that football for Isagi does not function only as a sport, but also as a platform where he can attempt to prove his self-worth through success and victory.

Isagi's Devouring Playstyle

Isagi's interpretation of football as a platform for self-worth is reflected in the development of his devouring playstyle. In *Blue Lock*, devouring means that someone can surpass other players through strategy, positioning, and adaptation inside the match. Since Isagi specializes in spatial awareness, he develops a calculated and adaptive playstyle that allows him to analyze the field and create opportunities for himself.



Figure 4: Isagi using Kurona for his goal
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 184, 2022

Figure 4 represents Isagi's calculated playstyle through his use of Meta Vision, which allows him to observe the field and predict everyone's movements more accurately. By cooperating with Ranze Kuzona, a fellow team member from the Blue Lock Project, and even using Kunigami as bait, Isagi adapts to the match situation to score the deciding goal. His use of other players also reflects ego-orientation as Isagi prioritizes becoming the decisive player of the match, surpassing everyone else on the field. There are also puzzle pieces shown around Isagi which act as symbolic signs that represent his strategic and problem-solving approach to football. Alongside his calculative trait, Isagi's also has an adaptive side from his devouring playstyle can be seen from his temporary cooperation with Michael Kaiser, despite seeing him as a rival.



Figure 5: Isagi making a deal with Kaiser
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 285, 2024

Figure 5 shows how Isagi adapts with the situation in front of him to achieve victory. Although Isagi and Kaiser constantly compete against each other, Isagi temporarily cooperates with Kaiser to defeat stronger opponents and create more opportunities to score. This moment represents how Isagi's devouring playstyle also has an adaptive ability to situations that may increase his chance of success. Even while cooperating, Isagi still maintains his personal objective of becoming the hero of the match, showing that football for him remains as a platform to show his self-worth. Isagi and Kaiser teaming up is also shown as a missing piece to Isagi's goal which is represented by puzzles as visual signs. This also shows Isagi's interpretation of football becomes reflected through a playstyle centered on calculation, adaptability, and the desire to become the hero of the match.

The Interpretation of Football for Rin Itoshi and the Impact towards His Playstyle

Rin Itoshi interprets football as a means of fulfilling a promise, which can be traced from his relationship with his older brother, Sae Itoshi. Unlike Isagi, who understands football as a platform to prove his self-worth, Rin initially sees football as a shared dream between himself and Sae to become the best strikers in the world. However, after Sae abandons their shared dream, Rin's understanding of football changes into a personal obligation to surpass his brother and fulfill the promise on his own. This interpretation later influences Rin's solo-dominant playstyle, where he relies heavily on individual ability and prefers to overcome opponents independently.

Football as a Promise to be Fulfilled

Rin's interpretation of football begins from his relationship with Sae during childhood, where football becomes closely tied to their shared dream.



Figure 6: Rin's previous dream in football
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 125, 2021

Figure 6 represents Rin's willingness to become the second-best player alongside Sae as part of their shared dream in football. Rin understands football from his relationship with Sae and their aspiration to become the best striker together rather than focusing on becoming the main figure himself. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics theory (1975), meaning develops through personal experiences and relationships. In Rin's case, football becomes meaningful because it is closely tied to his admiration for Sae and the emotional bond they share as brothers which results in football being interpreted as a promise connected to the dream Rin and Sae build together rather than a competitive sport.

However, Rin's interpretation of football changes after Sae returns from overseas and rejects their original dream, claiming that he no longer wants to become the best striker. Rin and Sae played against each other, which eventually led to their conversation in the following figure.



Figure 7: Rin and Sae's conversation after Sae defeated Rin
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 125, 2021

This moment marks the turning point in Rin's understanding of football as shown in Figure 7. Sae's rejection creates a rupture in the meaning Rin previously attached to football, forcing him to reinterpret it independently. Ricoeur (1984) explains that individuals construct meaning by connecting experiences into a personal narrative. In Rin's case, Sae rejection transforms football from a shared dream into a personal promise that Rin feels responsible to fulfill. Rather than abandoning football, Rin becomes increasingly determined to surpass Sae and prove himself through the sport that is supported by Rin's emotional shift into resentment with Sae.

Rin's Solo-Dominant Playstyle

Rin's interpretation of football as a promise that must be fulfilled is reflected in his solo-dominant playstyle. Since Rin's main goal is to prove Sae wrong and become the best striker in the world, he tends to rely heavily on his own ability to score his own goal rather than

teamwork to achieve success. This can be seen when he battles two defenders alone.



Figure 8: Rin going up against Isagi and Chigiri alone
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 80, 2020

Figure 8 shows Rin's tendency to handle situations independently, even against multiple opponents. Rin prioritizes his own skill and judgement to overcome challenges which reflects on how football functions as a personal mission rather than a collective effort. His decision to take on enemies alone also demonstrates ego-orientation as he wants to prove superiority against his opponents. This action shows how Rin's interpretation of football as a promise to be fulfilled is reflected from a playstyle centered on independence and the need to be a superior player.

The Interpretation of Football for Bachira Meguru and the Impact towards His Playstyle

Bachira Meguru interprets football as an imaginative escape from his feelings of isolation, where he eventually creates an imaginary "monster" that accompanies him while playing football. Unlike Isagi and Rin, whose understanding of football is shaped by self-worth and promises, Bachira sees football as a space where he can freely express himself and escape loneliness. This interpretation develops from his childhood experiences, where he cannot connect with other children and instead find comfort through football. As a result, Bachira develops a free-flowing, creative, and instinctive playstyle that reflects the imaginative meaning he attaches to football.

Football as a Way for Imaginative Escape

Bachira's interpretation of football becomes visible through the presence of the imaginary "monster," which he believes accompanies him while playing football as no other children would play with Bachira because he is too good. The following figure shows Bachira playing football with his imaginary monster.



Figure 9: Bachira playing football with his "monster."
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 70, 2020

Bachira playing with his monster as shown in Figure 9, represents his understanding of

football. Bachira's previous experiences of loneliness shape how he understands football as something closely connected to imagination and emotional comfort as he has no one to play with. The "monster" also functions as a symbolic representation of Bachira's imagination and desire for companionship, showing football to become more than a simple sport. Bachira's imaginative understanding is further shown through him tending to pass to the "monster" rather than a real teammate, reflecting how football becomes an imaginative space where he can freely express his gameplay inside the match.

Bachira's Free-flowing, Creative, and Instinctive Playstyle

Bachira's interpretation of football as imaginative escape is connected to the development of his free-flowing, creative, and instinctive playstyle. Since Bachira understands football as a space for freedom and self-expression, he tends to rely more on instinct, creativity and improvisation rather than structured strategy.



Figure 10: Bachira dribbling past an opponent
Source: *Blue Lock* Chapter 28, 2019

Figure 10 represents Bachira's creative and instinctive playstyle through his freedom of movement while dribbling. Bachira does not use a careful calculation and instead relies on his instinct and imagination while trying to dribble past the opponents in which he improvised in taking an existing dribbling move into something that has never been done before, shown by the surprised expression both from his opponent and Bachira himself. His playstyle also shows Bachira as a task-oriented player according to Nicholls' achievement goal theory (1984) because Bachira focuses on his personal growth rather than defeating his opponent. This shows Bachira's interpretation of football as an imaginative escape is reflected through a playstyle centered on creativity, instinct and freedom on the field.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how the characters in *Blue Lock* construct different personal interpretations of football and how these interpretations influence their playstyles using Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics theory, supported by Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, Ronkainen and Ryba's narrative perspective, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and achievement goal theory. Focusing on Isagi Yoichi, Rin Itoshi, and Bachira Meguru, the study shows how football is understood differently based on the characters' personal experiences, relationships, and motivations. Isagi interprets football as a platform to prove his self-worth, which results in his devouring playstyle that are both calculated and adaptive. Rin understands

football as a promise that must be fulfilled, influencing his solo-dominant playstyle centered on proving his capability. Meanwhile, Bachira sees football as an imaginative escape from isolation, resulting in a free-flowing, creative, and instinctive playstyle. Ultimately, *Blue Lock* represents football not only as a sport, but also as a space where personal meaning shapes the characters' identity and way of playing.

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