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Aggression and Violence in Sport: An ISSP Position Stand

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Aggression has long been a part of the sport domain. Indeed, Russell (1993, p. 191) suggested that outside of wartime, sports is perhaps the only setting in which acts of interpersonal aggression are not only tolerated but enthusiastically applauded by large segments of society. In recent years, however, violence in sport, both on and off the field, has come to be perceived as a social problem. For instance, commissions have been appointed in Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia to investigate violence in the athletic setting (National Committee on Violence, 1989; Pipe, 1993). In the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, and Australia, court cases have been heard concerning the sport-related victims or perpetrators of aggressive acts.

Aggression is defined as the infliction of an aversive stimulus, either physical, verbal, or gestural, upon one person by another. Aggression is not an attitude but behavior and, most critically, it is reflected in acts committed with the *intent* to injure (LeUnes & Nation, 1989). This definition of aggression includes such wide-ranging acts—engaged in by athletes, coaches, and/or spectators—as physically hitting another individual and verbal abuse.

Aggressive behavior can be classified according to the primary reinforcement sought via the act. Hostile aggression is where the principal reward, or intent, is to inflict upon another for its own sake. Instrumental aggression, on the other hand, is where the major reinforcement is the achievement of a subsequent goal. In this case, an athlete may intend to injure the opponent, but the most important goal

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to be achieved by the aggression act is to win the competition, to be acknowledged by the coach, and the like.

Violence refers specifically to the physical component of aggression. It is defined as “harm-inducing behavior bearing no direct relationship to the competitive goals of sport, and relates, therefore, to incidents of uncontrolled aggression outside the rules of sport, rather than highly competitive behavior within the rule boundaries” (Terry & Jackson, 1985, p. 27). In other words, violence is equated to physically inflicted illegal and hostile aggressive acts.

If there is no intent to injure the opponent and the athlete is using legitimate means in order to achieve his or her goals, then that athlete is not being aggressive but assertive. The distinction is that the intent, when one is being assertive, is to establish dominance rather than to harm the opponent (Thirer, 1994). As such, behaviors such as tackling in rugby, the hip and shoulder in Australian Football, checking in ice hockey, and breaking up a double play in baseball may be seen as assertive as long as they are performed as legal components of the contest and without malice. However, these same actions would represent aggression (hostile or instrumental) if the athlete’s intention was to cause injury (Anshel, 1990).

Spectators also may exhibit either hostile or instrumental aggression when they verbally abuse or throw objects at an opposing athlete or team. If the intent is to physically or psychologically injure the athlete, spectators are being hostile. If their intent is to gain an advantage for their team by distracting the opposing player(s), then this is considered instrumental aggression.

As Thirer (1993, pp. 365-366) stated, “those with a legitimate, genuine concern for all levels of sport, from early childhood experiences to age group and master’s competition, need to be acutely aware of the negative specter of aggression and violence. This applies equally to participant behavior and spectator behavior.” Because sport and society are presumed to mirror each other, the frequency and intensity of aggressive acts in the athletic realm take on added importance (i.e., the high levels of aggression and violence in sport may indeed go beyond the competitive event itself and have larger societal implications).

There are many reported causes of violence and aggression in sport settings. Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mouser, and Sears (1939) hypothesized that aggression results from frustration. However, it has since been shown that frustration (whether due to losing, not playing well, being hurt, perceiving unfairness in the competition) does not always produce aggressive behavior. Rather, being frustrated heightens one’s predisposition toward violent actions (Berkowitz, 1969). Contextual factors come into play and how an individual interprets the situational cues at hand best predicts whether this athlete or spectator will exhibit aggression.

In essence, aggression is primarily a learned behavior which is the result of an individual’s interactions with his or her social environment over time (Bandura, 1973). Aggression occurs in sports where an athlete’s generalized expectancies for reinforcement for aggressive behavior are high (e.g., receiving praise from parents, coaches, peers) and where the reward value outweighs punishment value (e.g., gaining a tactical and/or psychological advantage with a personal foul, a yardage penalty in American football). Situation-related expectancies (the time of game, score opposition, the encouragement of the crowd) also influence the athlete in terms of whether this is deemed an appropriate time to exhibit aggression (Husman & Silva, 1984).

Expectancies of reward (or punishment) for aggressive acts may be learned by previous reinforcement (or punishment) or by modeling/imitation of significant others such as coaches, parents, sport heroes (Coakley, 1981; Vaz, 1972; Bredemeier, 1980; Smith, 1988; Nash & Lerner, 1981). According to Silva (1984, p. 268), one of the main promoters and maintainers of aggressive behavior in sport is vicarious reinforcement of "the tendency to repeat behaviors that we observe others rewarded for performing." Conversely, "we are less likely to perform a behavior that we have seen another individual being punished for doing."

Research (Bredemeier & Shields, 1994, 1995; Bredemeier, Shields, Weiss, & Cooper, 1987) has shown that the dynamic interplay between the athlete and his or her socializing agents influences the athlete's reasoning about what is right and wrong in the athletic setting. The athletes' level of moral reasoning has been found to predict their judgments concerning the legitimacy of aggressive acts. Further, the level of moral reasoning demonstrated by athletes in the sport context tends to be lower than what is witnessed in other life domains.

It has been suggested that being aggressive can lead to a reduction in subsequent aggressive acts. This supposition is fundamental to the concept of catharsis but has received little empirical support (Thirer, 1993). In fact, research concerning vicarious catharsis specifically suggests that individuals tend to be more aggressive after observing aggression in the sport world. For example, Goldstein and Arms (1971) studied the effects of observing athletic contests on spectator hostility. Spectators were interviewed before and after an Army-Navy American football game and an Army-Temple collegiate gymnastics meet held the same month. The spectators at the football game had a significant increase in hostility as a result of watching the contest regardless of whether their team won or lost. The spectators at the gymnastics meet showed no such increase. Arms, Russell, and Sandilands (1979) repeated the study with spectators observing ice hockey, professional wrestling, or swimming. Their results were consistent with Goldstein and Arms' study in that hostility significantly increased as a result of observing the professional wrestling and ice hockey events. In contrast, spectators observing the swimming meet did not exhibit increased hostility scores. Numerous laboratory studies also have shown heightened levels of aggression on the part of the viewer when observing aggressive or violent behavior in a film session (Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973; Geen & O'Neal, 1969; Hartmann, 1969).

Research findings also suggest that fans like violence in their sports (Comisky, Bryant, & Zillman, 1977; Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1981; Bryant, Brown, Comisky, & Zillman, 1982). Bryant and Zillman (1983) have proposed that the media exploit this desire for violence in three ways. One is through an over-coverage of violent plays. For example, instances of violence in sport are often sensationalized and replayed over and over again on television. Secondly, many feature articles in magazines focus on and glorify violence. Finally, promotions in television programming are often exploitative by using past violent acts seen in previous sport contests to encourage spectators to attend or watch upcoming events.

The media must become more responsible in its reporting of sport. There is no need to rehash examples of violence and aggression in sport. The focus should be on the skills demonstrated and strategies employed by athletes and coaches rather than on acts of aggression. There are many sensitive and humane athletes and coaches who are involved in sport at all levels. Attempts should be made to present these individuals in a favorable light and give them greater media coverage.

Winning has become an essential part of sport, and increased professionalism breeds an atmosphere of "winning at all costs." The traditional causes of sport engagement, such as fun and fair play, appear to have decreased substantially. Research has shown that when athletes place a strong emphasis on beating others (in contrast to focusing on personal improvement and their own performance), they are more likely to endorse cheating and perceive intentionally injurious acts as more acceptable (Duda, Olson, & Templin, 1989). Unfortunately, some coaches and athletes take this state of affairs to the extreme and suggest that the use of aggression is necessary in order to win. Although there is some suggestion in the literature that aggression can lead to winning (Widmeyer, 1984), the human and monetary costs associated with the injuries that often accompany aggressive acts call into question such short-term gains. Moreover, when an athlete is frustrated and focused on inflicting harm to others, he or she is not concentrating on the task at hand and, thus, cannot perform optimally. The heightened state of arousal that usually is coupled with frustration should also result in performance impairment.

Coaches should be made aware of the potential damage of aggression in sport, not only for their team and the player at hand, but for society as a whole. At each competitive level and for every sport, a fair play code-of-conduct should be made a compulsory element in established and enforced guidelines for coaches.

Mark, Bryant, and Lehman (1983) indicated that, charged with the responsibility of making important split-second decisions and rule interpretations, officials can be a catalyst for arousing emotions conducive to player or spectator violence. Like players, officials are placed under great stress during games. Improving their ability to concentrate, control unnecessary arousal, and cope with pressure will enable officials to officiate more competently and eliminate errors that inflame aggressive acts in athletes and spectators. With the developmental of such mental skills, officials should be more likely to consistently and appropriately enforce game rules that promote fair play and minimize violent behavior.

Physical factors, such as heat, noise, and crowding have been espoused as causes of aggression in sport, especially among spectators. What emerges from the research, however, is that these factors appear to be facilitators of aggression (i.e., they interact with other variables to produce aggression in situations in which the propensity for aggression already exists). Other factors that have repeatedly been linked with acts of spectator vandalism and hooliganism worldwide include alcohol abuse, the presence of rival fans who are members of groups that are at odds in the larger society, and previous occurrences of athlete aggression in the competition itself. Coalter (1985) suggested that seating, the segregation of rival fans, and ban of alcohol are effective in reducing spectator violence only when offered in combination rather than separately.

Behavior that inflicts harm upon another, either physical or psychological, and bears no direct relationship to the competitive goals of sport is unacceptable. Whether classified as hostile or instrumental, if these intentionally harmful acts lead to injuries that transcend the competitive event per se, then such behaviors should be deemed inappropriate as well. In contrast, assertive behavior that falls within the rules should be considered "part of sport."

Suggestions regarding how we might counter aggressive behavior are broad and multifaceted as the solution to the problem of violence in sport is not a simple one. They stem from suggestions proposed throughout the literature (Yeagher, 1979; Cox, 1985; Freischlag & Schmidke, 1979; Lefebvre, Leith, & Bredemeier, 1980;

Mark, Bryant, & Lehman, 1983; LeUnes & Nation, 1989). In a hope of dramatically reducing the incidence of aggression and violence in the athletic domain, *the International Society of Sport Psychology* makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Management should make fundamental penalty revisions so that rule-violating behavior results in punishments that have greater punitive value than potential reinforcement.

Recommendation 2: Management must ensure proper coaching of teams, particularly at junior levels, which emphasizes a fair play code-of-conduct among all participants.

Recommendation 3: Management should ban the use of alcoholic beverages at sporting events.

Recommendation 4: Management must make sure facilities are adequate regarding catering and spacing needs and the provision of modern amenities.

Recommendation 5: The media must place in proper perspective the isolated incidents of aggression that occur in sport rather than making them “highlights.”

Recommendation 6: The media should promote a campaign to decrease violence and hostile aggression in sport which will also involve the participation and commitment of athletes, coaches, management, officials, and spectators.

Recommendation 7: Coaches, managers, athletes, media, officials, and authority figures (i.e., police) should take part in workshops on aggression and violence to ensure they understand the topic of aggression, why it occurs, the cost of aggressive acts, and how aggressive behavior can be controlled.

Recommendation 8: Coaches, managers, officials, and the media should encourage athletes to engage in prosocial behavior and punish those who perform acts of hostility.

Recommendation 9: Athletes should take part in programs aimed at helping them reduce behavioral tendencies toward aggression. The tightening of rules, imposing of harsher penalties, and changing of reinforcement patterns are only part of the answer to inhibiting aggression in sport. Ultimately, the athlete must assume responsibility for his or her behavior.

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