

BUILDING A NEW BRAND OF SPORT[®] — What About Violence?

As a society, can we claim that all violence in sport is morally wrong and therefore should be penalized or banned outright? The obvious answer is “yes”, but like many ethical issues, on closer examination this question is more complex. For example, some sports, as part of their rules, require intense physical contact which may cause pain, injury or other harm. In such cases, are the sports themselves morally unacceptable?

The starting point for a meaningful discussion on this issue is to use a common definition for violence in sport. The following definition is put forward for this purpose:

VIOLENCE IN SPORT is a physical assault or other physically harmful actions by a player that takes place in a sports context and that is intended to cause physical pain or injury to another player (or fan, coach, game official, etc.), where such harmful actions bear no direct relationship to the rules and associated competitive goals of the sport.

Note that this definition excludes assertive behaviour by athletes wherein there is no intent to injure the opponent and legitimate means within the official rules of the game are used to achieve the goals of the sport.

If this definition is widely accepted and if there is overall consensus that violence in sport, as so defined, is always morally wrong, what would be the next steps for developing related policy positions or ethical standards? In trying to apply this or a similar definition of violence in sport to policies or standards, it becomes clear that there are many questions to resolve.

- **Intention:** How will intention be determined? Physical harm, injury and even incapacitation can be caused without intent and within the rules of the game. But intent can be extremely difficult to assess. Policies and standards that depend on determining intent may not be able to cover all situations fairly and equitably.
- **Violence within the rules:** Many sports permit behaviour within their rules that can cause an opponent pain, injury, or incapacitation. Some sports, like boxing, even permit actions intended to cause pain. Other sports, such as ice hockey, football and rugby, permit physical intimidation of opponents through aggressive physical contact that can and does cause pain and injury. In the context of sport, determining the moral status of behaviour that results in a harmful outcome will need to take into consideration whether the behaviour was within or outside the rules.
- **Accepted or expected violence outside the rules:** Quite high levels of violence, such as fighting, may occur outside of the rules of the game and yet be expected, or even valued. So even if an act is violent and outside of the rules it may be an accepted or expected part of the game. The degree to which violence outside of the rules is acceptable can be culturally or gender based, or linked to the history of a sport.
- **Scope:** Discussion of violence in sport will need to include actions taken by fans, spectators and relatives of those directly involved in the sport.

- **Informed consent:** When assessing the moral status of an action it is often necessary to examine the issue of consent by the person on whom the action is performed. Most sports carry some risk of harm because they require physical exertion. In contact sports, the harm may be caused by the legitimate and permissible actions of an opponent. Generally, acts which are within the rules of the game are considered morally acceptable based on the implicit consent of participants, even when such acts cause harm. However, consent can only be valid if the person is adequately informed of what it is he or she is consenting to.

If playing a sport implies a form of presumed consent, do players always know just what it is they are consenting to? Moreover, the principle of informed consent applies most clearly to competent adults, and less clearly to minors and the incompetent. Our laws do not permit minors to give a valid consent to all sorts of behaviours. Should minors be permitted to consent to the risk of harm that comes from participating in a variety of contact sports? How does informed consent apply to sports that tacitly accept a certain amount of violence outside of the rules of the game? For example, fighting in hockey is an accepted part of the game for many players and in many leagues. The evidence of acceptance is that fighting is expected, players who fight are praised and rewarded, and the penalties imposed are insufficient to deter the player or harm the team.

There are several theories on the causes of violence, both in sport and in the general population, that could be relevant to developing policy positions or ethical standards.

- **Biology:** This theory suggests that humans are inherently violent. In this theory, sport would offer a relatively safe and controlled way to discharge aggression.
- **Psychology:** Violence is caused by frustration as one's efforts to reach a goal are blocked. In sport, this frustration could be caused by officials, opponents and so on.
- **Social Learning:** This is currently considered the most persuasive explanation. Violence in sport is learned as an accepted method of "playing the game". Violence, or fighting, might be officially condemned and penalized but unofficially praised by coaches, team-mates, fans, the media, etc. The official penalties may be insufficient to deter the behaviour.

Building a new brand of sport that supports core positive values such as respect, fair play, discipline and integrity means finding practical answers to these issues and developing the commitment and means to change.

What about violence in sport? To start, we need to determine for each sport what constitutes crossing the line between playing the game and unacceptable violent behaviour. Then, we need to:

- remove any rewards for unacceptable violence by players.
- penalize unacceptable violence so that the disadvantages outweigh any advantage that may be gained in a game.

- encourage players and coaches to focus on skill and the joy of striving for excellence rather than merely on the outcome of winning. The players who lose a well-played, fair game must become more valued than the players of a poorly-played, unfair or lucky win.
 - organize workshops, education sessions, team, parent and community meetings, and public awareness campaigns on the positive core values of sport, fair play and how we can build a new brand of sport together.
 - encourage participants to see opponents as necessary collaborators in the pursuit of the well-played game and worthwhile sport, not as enemies to be conquered or vanquished.
 - encourage the pursuit of sporting excellence and fun by being the best that you can be in fair, honest and skillful competition.
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Further Reading:

Smith, M.D., *Violence and Sport*, Toronto, Ontario: Butterworths, 1983

Smith, M.D., *Violence in Canadian Amateur Sport: A Review of the Literature*, Ottawa, Ontario: Commission for Fair Play, Government of Canada, 1987

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport welcomes your feedback, comments and suggestions about this discussion paper. Please contact us at:

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