

BRACKETED MORALITY IN SPORT

Visnja Djordjic¹

¹University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sport and Physical Education

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SUMMARY

Although sport can promote moral values and prosocial behavior in youth, numerous research shows that sports engagement alone does not guarantee that outcome. Instead of striving for fair-play and sport excellence which not exclude justness, solidarity and moral integrity, contemporary sport frequently follows the Lombardian ethic, where „winning isn't everything, it's the only thing“. Moral pause or bracketed morality, as described in sport, refers to the phenomenon of tolerance and acceptance of aggressive behavior or cheating, that will be morally condemned outside sports arenas. Accordingly, lower levels of moral reasoning and behavior have been identified in athletes and non-athletes in the sports-related situation in comparison to other life situations; in athletes when compared to non-athletes, in more experienced athletes, high-level athletes, team-sport athletes, and male athletes. Moral reasoning and behavior of athletes are influenced by contextual and personal factors, with coaches having a particularly important role to play. The positive influence of sport on the moral development of athletes might be related to pre-service and in-service education of coaches how to develop adequate moral atmosphere, and how to plan for moral decision-making as an integral part of everyday practice.

Keywords: bracketed morality, sport, youth, coaches

Correspondence author

Visnja Djordjic
djordjicvisnja@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

When we think of morality and sport, a good starting point might be Oscar Wild's saying „*Morality, like arts, means drawing a line someplace.*“. The questions

arise: Where is the line in sport? To what extent are we ready to cross that line or to push it further? Do same moral standards apply in the sport domain, and other life domains?

Let us begin with the operational definition of sport as a complex social phenomenon. According to Tamburrini¹ (2000), if some activity is to be regarded as sport, it should meet five criteria:

1. It must contain an element of competition;
2. Challenge individual's physical capacity;
3. Have a wide following (popularity);
4. Be practiced for a lengthy period;
5. Have its own area of unique expertise.

Activities like basketball, gymnastics, skiing or swimming, meet all of the above criteria, while folk dances or the game of bridge can not be regarded as sports activities. *Why do we encourage children to take part in sports?* There are many benefits that we expect from youth's participation in organized sport: good health and balanced development (physical, social, mental), improved social skills and self-confidence, goal setting and working towards their fulfillment, rule obedience, respect for peers and competition, learning how to win and lose, etc. The fundamental mission of sport, according to many, is to provide children and youth with healthy, safe, and character-building recreation. Sport is seen as a desirable alternative to unhealthy lifestyles, as well as a school of life, and a good preparation for facing different life challenges.

The famous statement that the *Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton* ascribed to the Duke of Wellington, reminds us that from its very beginnings, the modern sport has had aspirations to strengthen the morale of individual and of a nation. So it comes as no surprise, that even nowadays sport is considered as a favorable context for prosocial behavior development.²

Of course, the opposite opinions exist, too. Even George Orwell, the dark prophet of the quasi-democratic and illiberal contemporary world, writes harshly about sport in his essay „The Sporting Spirit“ back in 1945: „Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness,

¹ Claudio M. Tamburrini, *The "Hand of God"? : Essays in the Philosophy of Sports* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2000)..

² Esther A., Rutten, Carlo Schuengel, Evelien Dirks, Geert Jan J. M. Stams, Gert J. J. Biesta, and Jan B. Hoeksma, "Predictors of Antisocial and Prosocial Behavior in an Adolescent Sports Context," *Social Development* 20, no. 2 (2011): 294-315.

disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words, it is war minus the shooting.“

Indeed, besides positive values and principles, sport suffers from numerous negativities: winning at all costs, unfair behavior, cheating, doping, violence, fights, lying, match-fixing, etc. A very inspiring is a case of Gloria Clarke,³ whose painful personal experience has been an important driving force behind her academic interest in studying the relationship between sports and criminal activities of young offenders. A strong believer in the protective power of sport engagement, she has had to face with felony and imprisonment of her own son, who has been an active rugby player for 14 years. Through a set of interviews with young offenders, Clarke reached the conclusion that heavy sports involvement may have contributed to a mindset that led to anti-social behaviors. The boys were dehumanized and more willing to be involved in physical violence out of the sport domain, and their shared experience included rugby involvement, intimidating coaches, they had participated in sport and crime at the same time; they had been coached by intimidating people, and they had stepped into the criminal between 13 and 18 years old.

BRACKETED MORALITY

Many authors agree that there are no guarantees that sport participants will eventually learn and acquire positive sport values through their sport involvement. It is necessary to proclaim character development as a clearly stated goal, supported by all sports agents.⁴

Although sport rules are meant to protect the integrity of the game, there are some grey zones and behaviors that are regarded as *gamesmanship*. These behaviors are usually not against the official rules strictly saying, yet the actions are oriented toward gaining the advantage over the opponents by distracting them, stalling, abuse of the rules and so on. Gamesmanship is widespread in sports. The statement of Natalie Benson, an American water polo player, and two-time Olympian, fairly illustrates the reasoning behind the morally questionable behaviors in sport: “because players can’t touch the bottom of the pool, they must find ways to create their own leverage by using their opponents.”⁵ The players are constantly jockeying for position, there is „the game within the game“ going on:

³ Gloria Hine Clarke, (2012). “Why Do Youth Step Out of Sport and into Court? A Narrative-Based Exploration” (MA Thesis, University of Waikato, 2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/10289/7139>

⁴ Joseph Doty, “Sports Build Character?!” *Journal of College and Character* 7, no. 3 (2006).

⁵ Tim Wallace, “In Water Polo, the Real Action is Under the Water,” *The New York Times* (2016). <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/16/sports/olympics/rio-us-womens-water-polo.html>

grabbing, kicking, dunking, pinching, holding, etc. The majority of these actions are happening under the water, while referees are mostly focused on players with the ball. There are many examples of gamesmanship in other sports as well:

- soccer – diving, simulation of an injury, the distraction of the opponents, moving of the defense wall, etc.;
- tennis – stalling, tying the shoes, wiping with towel, medical time out, screaming while serving, changing the rackets, slowly picking up the balls, etc.;
- basketball – „good fouls“, putting the referees under pressure by constantly commenting and protesting because of their decisions, teaching players how to make fouls hard to detect, etc.;
- volleyball – players do not admit they touched the ball before it went out. Results of a recent study⁶ show that 48.8% high school coaches found that it is acceptable for a player to lie about winning point out;
- gamesmanship also includes doping, interfering with equipment, intentional misses, obstruction of the game in order to keep the favorable result, etc.

Gamesmanship occurs in the shady moral zone, denying the very spirit of the game. The gamesmanship is guided by the morally unacceptable premises:

- Winning is not the most important thing; it's everything („the Lombardian ethic“);
- Cheating is only when you get caught;
- It is up to the referees to take care of rules violations;
- The end justifies the means.

Unlike the sportsmanship where an intention to compete by the rules exists, the gamesmanship means competing up to the limits defined by the rules, and beyond them, if possible. The winning imperative puts a lot of pressure on all sport actors, thus affecting their moral reasoning. Even ancient Olympic games celebrated the winners exclusively! The famous epitaph found near Olympia says: „*Agathos Daimon, nicknamed 'the camel,' from Alexandria, a victor at Nemea. He died here, boxing in the stadium, having prayed to Zeus for victory or death. Age 35.*“

⁶ Brad Strand, “Gamesmanship Beliefs of High School Coaches,” *ICHPER-SD Journal of Research* 8, no. 1 (2013): 20.

Farewell."⁷. What a dramatical resume of one's short life, with extreme physical exertion, *agon*, and above all, victory, making the only sense of it!

Sports environment, that Orwellian battlefield without shooting, „nuclear warfare with no winners, only survivors“⁸, where stakes and emotions are high, is a favorable context for a phenomenon denoted as a bracketed morality.⁹ Bracketed morality relates to people acting differently in sport, then in „real“ life. Even Huizinga argued that sport, as formalized play, is not „ordinary“ or „real“ life, but rather a stepping out of „real“ life. Sport is considered to be a separated life arena, where specific rules apply, and much of otherwise unaccepted behavior is allowed, so it can be described as a moral pause. In sport, some actions and behaviors are well accepted, sometimes even encouraged and celebrated, that would be rather unacceptable in other situations (e.g. lying, intentionally hurting other people, swearing, insulting, rule-bending, etc.).

A set of previous research^{10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18} identified few important relationships:

⁷ Moses I. Finley, and H. W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: the First Thousands Years* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976).

⁸ „Pro football is like nuclear warfare. There are no winners, only survivors.“, a statement made by Frank Gifford (1930-2015), an American football player and television sports comenntator.

⁹ Brenda Jo Bredemeier, and David L. Shields, „The Utility of Moral Stage Analysis in the Investigation of Athletic Aggression,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 1 (1984): 138-49.

¹⁰ Jennifer M. Beller and Sharon Kay Stoll, „Moral Reasoning of High-School Student-Athletes and General Students: An Empirical Study Versus Personal Testimony,” *Pediatric Exercise Science* 7 (1995): 352-63.

¹¹ Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier, „Childrens' Moral Reasoning and Their assertive, Aggressive, and Submissive Tendencies in Sport and Daily-life,” *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 16 (1994): 1-14.

¹² Brenda Jo Bredemeier, and David L. Shields, „The Utility of Moral Stage Analysis in the Investigation of Athletic Aggression,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 1 (1984): 138-49.

¹³ Brenda Jo Bredemeier, and David L. Shields, „Athletic Aggression: An Issue of Contextual Morality,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3, no. 1 (1986a): 15-28.

¹⁴ Brenda Jo Bredemeier, and David L. Shields, „Moral Growth Among Athletes and Nonathletes: A Comparative Analysis,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 147 (1986b): 7-18.

¹⁵ Luis Calmeiro, Sharon Kay Stoll, Paul Davis, „Moral Reasoning in Sport: Validation of the Portuguese Version of the RSBH Value-Judgement Inventory in Adolescents,” *Sport Science Review* 24, no. 5-6 (2015): 285-304.

¹⁶ Rebecca Ellis Gardner, and Christopher M. Janelle, „Legitimacy Judgments of Perceived Aggression and Assertion by Contact and Non-Contact Sport Participants,” *International Journal of Sport Psychology* 33, no. 3 (2002): 290-306.

¹⁷ David L. Shields, and Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier, *Character Development and Physical Activity* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995).

¹⁸ David Lyle Light Shields, Douglas E. Gardner, Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier, and Alan Bostrom, „Leadership, Cohesion, and Team Norms Regarding Cheating and Aggression,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 3 (1995): 324-36.

Athletes, as well as non-athletes, tend to have less mature moral reasoning (egocentric, instrumental, less emphatic and prosocial behavior) for the sport domain in comparison to non-sporting domains;

Athletes are characterized by less mature moral reasoning than non-athletes, males are morally less mature than females, as well as athletes who practice sport for a long period of time, higher level athletes and team sport athletes.

The findings support the assumption that long-term sport involvement, particularly at the elite level, might have an adverse impact on moral development of athletes.

The question arises: why would athletes feel free of deliberating moral decisions? Bredemeier & Shields¹⁹ and others consider the following reasons:

- We act differently toward members of our group (in sport: our team), in comparison to members of a different group (in sport: the opponents);
- Ethical relativism. Morality varies depending on context; what is allowed and acceptable in sport, might not be acceptable in other domains;
- Responsibility is concentrated in the roles of coaches and officials. The officials are authorized to take care of regularity of the game and to sanction the rules' violations, while coaches, for example, take responsibility when they require their players to play a rough game;
- Rules function as external regulations of what is considered adequate behavior. If there is no overt violation of the rules, the action is regarded as acceptable;
- Participants are often not fully informed about their rights, responsibilities, and risks (i.e. use of doping);
- The competition itself prevents moral dialogue and enhances the orientation towards personal/team gain, no matter what are the interests and needs of others involved in the situation.

If we want sports to not only build better athletes but also better people²⁰, it is important to learn about factors influencing athletes' moral reasoning and

¹⁹ Brenda Jo Bredemeier, and David L. Shields, "Athletic Aggression: An Issue of Contextual Morality," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3, no. 1 (1986a): 15-28.

²⁰ „Sports not only build better athletes but also better people.“ is a statement made by Julie Foudy (1971 -), US national soccer team member, winner of Olympic gold medal and FIFA fair-play award.

behavior. Kavussanu, Roberts, and Ntoumanis,²¹ when considering factors that influence moral reasoning of basketball players single out: moral atmosphere, motivational climate and athlete's goal orientations.

The key factor is *moral atmosphere*,²² the culture and collective norms of behavior developed through group members interaction. Every sport team or sport club is characterized by a specific moral atmosphere: what is considered good and bad, acceptable-unacceptable, desirable-undesirable, how we do things around (e.g. how do we treat opponents, fans, officials, how do we respond in morally ambivalent situations, etc.).

Motivational climate refers to the preference of competitive and cooperative goals, structures and activities. Too much emphasis on competition and winning decreases prosocial behavior, and increases hostility and aggression. On the other hand, cooperation enhances empathy and sensitivity to other people's needs.²³

Athletes' goal orientations are also related to moral reasoning and behavior. Generally, two goal orientations exist: task orientation, where the main goal is to master the task and improve, and ego orientation, where athletes are driven by comparative standards of success.²⁴ A high level of ego orientation is associated with unsportsmanlike behavior and a lower level of moral reasoning.²⁵

Coaches, no doubt, play a key role in the development of the healthy sporting environment, the one that contributes to the moral development of athletes. Coaches can directly influence individual athletes, or they can indirectly influence athletes by developing appropriate moral atmosphere and motivational climate. Firstly, coaches have to reconsider their own coaching philosophy and how morality fits in.²⁶ What do they find acceptable, and what is not acceptable? Do they have the same moral standards when it comes to sports and non-sports domains? If coaches have different standards they may model bracketed morality

²¹ Maria Kavussanu, Glyn C. Roberts, and Nikos Ntoumanis, "Contextual Influences on Moral Functioning of College Basketball Players," *The Sport Psychologist* 16, No. 4 (2002): 347-67.

²² F. Clark Power, Ann Higgins, and Lawrence A. Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

²³ David L. Shields, and Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier, *Character Development and Physical Activity* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995).

²⁴ Joan L. Duda, "The Relationship Between Task and Ego Orientation and the Perceived Purpose of Sport Among Male and Female High School Athletes," *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 11 (1989): 318-35.

²⁵ Joan L. Duda, Linda K. Olson, and Thomas J. Templin, "The Relationship of Task and Ego Orientation to Sportsmanlike Attitudes and the Perceived Legitimacy of Injurious Acts," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 62, (1991): 79-87.

²⁶ Terilyn C. Shigeno, E. Earlynn Lauer, Leslee A. Fisher, Emily J. Johnson, and Rebecca A. Zakrajsek, "The Coach's Role in Creating Moral Group Norms in Youth Sport," *International Sport Coaching Journal* 00 (2019): 1-6.

behaviors, thus enhancing similar moral reasoning patterns in athletes. Besides, coaches are the most responsible for creating the moral atmosphere and motivational climate. They set the tone, and essentially influence rules formation, as well as group moral norms. They are responsible for athletes' inclusion in these processes, and they monitor moral norms implementation, both in sport and outside the sport. It is important to include athletes in setting the group moral norms, which can be done through discussion before or after the training session.²⁵ Finally, although sport is abundant in various, often morally ambivalent situations, in order to influence athletes' moral reasoning, coaches have to plan and integrate moral decisions into everyday training practice. Morally superior decisions have to be reinforced, and unacceptable behaviors should be sanctioned.

CONCLUSION

Bracketed morality, although described and interpreted in sport and sport-related situations, should not be an excuse for immoral behavior in sport. When it comes to morality, there is no tolerance or compromise, because moral values are universal and apply to each and everyone.²⁷ Therefore, a separated morality within the sport domain is indefensible, and misdemeanors have to be condemned, no matter if it interferes with someone's interests or if the offenses are done to win the match, if there are no apparent rules violations, if coaches are to blame. All major world religions know the *golden rule*: „Do not treat others in ways that you would not like to be treated“ or in the positive form „Treat others as you would like others to treat you“. In modern neuroscience the golden rule, i.e. moral, altruistic behavior, is seen as an authentic trait of human nature, that through complex neural mechanisms help the survival of the group.²⁸ Paul the Apostle, in The First Epistle to the Corinthians²⁹ provides a reliable moral guideline:

²⁷ Jovan Babić, „Etika i moral,“ *Theoria* 51, no. 2 (2008): 35-48.

²⁸ Donald W. Pfaff, *The Neuroscience of Fair Play: Why We (Usually) Follow the Golden Rule* (New York/Washington, D.C: Dana Press, 2007).

²⁹ In Apostles times, the Isthmian Games were held in Corinthus, which might explain the usage of sports metaphors in St. Paul's Epistles, for example: „Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way as to take the prize.“ (I Cor. 9, 24). „Everyone who competes in the games trains with strict discipline. They do it for a crown that is perishable, but we do it for a crown that is imperishable.“ (I Cor. 9, 25)

„All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable.

All things are lawful, but not all things edify“

(I Cor. 10, 23).

As sport actors we have the freedom to choose between the good and the bad, between moral and immoral; no personal benefit or advantage (not even odds of winning) should not cloud our moral reasoning. An athlete should not be a wolf to another athlete, but a partner in creating a sporting event and overcoming themselves in terms of physical abilities and moral growth, as well.

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ПРАВСТВЕННОСТЬ В КАВЫЧКАХ В СПОРТЕ

АННОТАЦИЯ

Несмотря на то, что спорт может способствовать развитию нравственных ценностей и должного социального поведения в молодежной среде, многочисленные исследования показывают, что само по себе занятие спортом не гарантирует такого результата. Вместо того чтобы стремиться к честной игре и спортивному совершенству, которое не исключает справедливости, солидарности и нравственной целостности, современный спорт часто следует Ломбардской этике, где „победа – это не все, а единственное“. Нравственная пауза или нравственность в кавычках, как описано в спорте, относится к явлению терпимости и принятия агрессивного поведения или обмана, которые будут осуждены с точки зрения нравственности вне спортивных арен. Соответственно, более низкие уровни рассуждений о нравственности и примеры поведения были выявлены у спортсменов и не спортсменов в ситуации, связанной со спортом, по сравнению с другими жизненными ситуациями; у спортсменов по сравнению с не спортсменами, у более опытных спортсменов, спортсменов высокого уровня, спортсменов командного спорта и спортсменов мужского пола. Нравственные умозаключения и поведение спортсменов зависят от ситуативных и личностных факторов, при этом тренеры играют особенно важную роль. Положительное влияние спорта на нравственное развитие спортсменов может быть связано с начальной педагогической подготовкой и с дистанционным обучением тренеров в вопросах формирования адекватной нравственной атмосферы и планирования принятия нравственных решений, как неотъемлемой части повседневной практики.

Ключевые слова: нравственность в кавычках, спорт, молодежь, тренеры

СУСПЕНДОВАНА МОРАЛНОСТ У СПОРТУ

САЖЕТАК

Иако спорт може промовисати моралне вредности и просоцијално понашање младих, бројна истраживања показују да само бављење спортом није гаранција да ће се то заиста и десити. Уместо фер-плеја и афирмације спортске изузетности која не искључује правичност, солидарност и морални интегритет, савремени спорт много пута следи ломбардијанску етику, где „победа није најважнија, већ једино важна ствар“. Морална пауза или суспендована моралност, описана у спорту, означава појаву да се многи поступци, попут агресивног понашања и варања, у спорту толеришу и

прихватају, док би изван спортске арене наишли на моралну осуду. С тим у вези, морално резонување и понашање нижег нивоа, констатовано је за и спортисте и неспортисте када је реч о спортском домену, у поређењу са ситуацијама из свакодневног живота; такође, код спортиста у поређењу са неспортистима, затим код спортиста дужег спортског стажа, вишег ранга такмичења, спортиста из групних спортова и спортиста мушког пола. На морално резонување и понашање спортиста, могу утицати различити контекстуални фактори и фактори везани за личност спортисте, а посебно значајну улогу имају тренери. Позитиван утицај спорта на морални развој спортиста може бити повезан са иницијалном и континуираном едукацијом тренера за стварање адекватне моралне атмосфере и планирање ситуација које захтевају доношење моралних одлука, као саставног дела тренинга.

Кључне речи: суспендована моралност, спорт, млади, тренери

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