A Qualitative Study on the Moral Reasoning of College Athletes

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Some sport scholars have posited that sport provides a unique medium for developing moral character (e.g., Arnold, 1994; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). This belief is maintained on the grounds that moral values such as fairness, honesty, respect, compassion, and responsibility are integral to all sports (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). Thus, players are in a position to make choices to uphold or violate moral values, (i.e., demonstrate moral character). For example, they must maintain the rules of any given sport to ensure a fair and level playing field (Arnold, 1994). Furthermore, Clifford and Feezell (1997) proposed all competitive athletes need good and challenging opponents to excel. This requires players to treat their opponents with respect. Additional examples could include showing compassion by not “running up the score” against an inferior opponent or refraining from dishonest use of performance enhancing drugs.

Related to the notion that sport participation can promote moral character, Arnold (1992) has suggested sport should be considered a valued human practice. Arnold’s view can be understood by the following:

Like farming, physics, engineering, or architecture, sport is a practice because it is a peculiarly human activity in which values internal to that activity are discovered and realized in the course of trying to achieve the standards of excellence that characterize it (p. 239).

Importantly, Arnold also added:

In order to preserve the integrity of practices, so that participants in them uphold and pursue the internal goals and standards of excellence that characterize them, it is necessary that such qualities as justice, honesty, and courage are fostered and encouraged.

To summarize, athletes who appreciate the “practice view of sport,” do not concern themselves with external goals such as money, fame, and championships. Rather, athletes of the practice view appreciate the intrinsic value of competing against worthy opponents on a morally sound playing field. In essence, how one plays the game is more important than winning or losing. Furthermore, because the practice view is concerned with
competing while upholding moral values such as honesty and fairness, it is clear why sport can be thought of as a vehicle for developing moral character.

There is, however, a picture of sport that contravenes the practice view and the notion that sport builds moral character. Sport has a history of athletes and coaches attempting to win at all costs (Rader, 2004). General examples have included the use of illicit performance enhancing drugs, violent intimidation tactics, trash talking, professional fouls in basketball (i.e., purposely fouling another player to gain an advantage) and fake fouls (e.g., pretending to be tripped in soccer) (A purpose, 1999; Arnold, 1992; Lumpkin et al. 2003). Thus, a paradox has existed between idealistic notions of sport building moral character versus the reality of competing with a winning at all costs mentality.

To better understand sport’s alleged character building ability, a variety of studies have assessed athletes’ moral reasoning and character development (e.g., Beller & Stoll 1992, 1995; Bredemeier & Shields, 1984, 1986; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Tod & Hodge, 2001). This study sought to extend a particular body of research that has used a quantitative assessment called the Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI). The specific objective of this study will be explained shortly. But first, it is necessary to provide a description of the HBVCI, as well as a brief summary of the studies that have used the HBVCI.

Developed by Hahm, Beller, and Stoll (1989), the HBVCI purports to measure morally principled thinking of athletes and non-athletes. The instrument consists of 16 items involving various moral issues or gamesmanship strategies that occur in competition. To clarify terms, gamesmanship has been defined as, “pushing the rules to the limit without getting caught, using whatever dubious methods possible to achieve the desired end” (Lumpkin et al. 2003, p. 57). A moral issue is when one must make a choice between values; usually moral values versus non-moral values or moral values compared to social values (Lumpkin et al. 2003). Certainly, one could argue that gamesmanship practices are in fact moral issues. However, despite this overlap, this paper’s point is to make the reader aware that the HBVCI contains questions that are distinctly gamesmanship oriented versus others that are not.

Concomitant with each gamesmanship/moral issue is at least one of three moral values: honesty, fairness, and responsibility. These moral values are pitted generally against the non-moral value of winning. Responding on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree), athletes choose between endorsing the particular gamesmanship/unethical practice or supporting the moral value. For example, consider the following item:
During a volleyball game, player A hit the ball over the net. The ball barely grazed off player B’s fingers and landed out of bounds. However, the referee did not see player B touch the ball. Because the referee is responsible for calling rule violations, player B is not obligated to report the violation.

In this scenario, subjects must decide if they agree or disagree that it is the referee’s responsibility rather than the player’s to call a rules violation. Respondents who disagree are suggesting they support the moral value of honesty over winning and taking advantage of the referee’s mistake. The more frequently one supports the use of moral values over unethical strategies and events occurring across the different scenarios, the higher one’s score on the HBVCI.

The HBVCI is also supported theoretically by deontological ethics which holds that right and wrong decisions should be based on one’s obligation to uphold moral values regardless of the consequences or obtainment of non-moral good (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2003; Frankena, 1973). Thus, in theory, an athlete who supports moral values over competing unethically to win is acting as a deontic and would receive a higher score. Comparatively, a low score on the HBVCI implies that the individual may be using a different ethical approach such as teleological ethics or ethical egoism.

Teleological ethics says that right and wrong is concerned with achieving the greatest amount of good over evil. Right decisions are based on an appeal to the amount of non-moral good (e.g., money, power, or winning) that can be obtained rather than the upholding of moral values (Frankena, 1973). Ethical egoists believe rightness is achieved by doing what will promote the greatest good for oneself (Frankena, 1973). Applied to the above scenario, an athlete who agrees that it is the referee’s responsibility to make the call may take a teleological stance rationalizing that a greater good over evil will be achieved by being dishonest with the referee and moving closer toward winning the match. Similarly, an athlete who subscribes to ethical egoism might agree with the above scenario because he or she believes that not telling the referee will help them win the match and thus promote the greatest good for their self. The main point is that an ethical perspective other than deontological may be taken by respondents. However, these alternative philosophies will most likely result in a low score on the HBVCI.

For the past 17 years, numerous studies have been conducted on athletes’ (high school and college) moral reasoning/moral character while utilizing the HBVCI (e.g., Beller & Stoll 1992, 1995; Beller, Stoll, & Rudd, 1997; Penny & Priest, 1990; Rudd, Stoll, & Beller, 1997; Stoll, Beller, Cole, & Burwell, 1995). Some of these studies have compared a cross-section of team sport athletes, individual sport athletes, and non-athletes. Results have generally shown team sport athletes use a lower level of moral reasoning compared
Individual sport athletes’ level of moral reasoning is similar to non-athletes, although not quite as high (Beller & Stoll, 1995; Rudd, 1997; Rudd et al. 1997).

In addition to empirical studies, research with the HBVCI has become well publicized in a variety of major newspapers and magazines (e.g., “Study Sheds,” 2005; Wolverton, 2006). Media reports have highlighted the low moral reasoning of athletes and how findings from studies with the HBVCI explain the morally deprived behavior of many college and professional athletes. Notably, the amassing of an enormous HBVCI database consisting of over 80,000 individuals in the form of athletes and non-athletes at the high school and college level, military cadets from the United States Military Academy at West Point, the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, and coaches at varying levels may be the reason writers of newspapers and magazines have taken an interest in Stoll and her colleague’s research (Theoretical Information on the HBVCI, n.d.).

Other studies have also suggested athletes lack moral character and possess low levels of moral reasoning. Bredemeier and Shield’s (1984, 1986) research for example, intimates that athletes (high school and college level) engaged in competition suppress their normal upholding of morality and replace it with selfish, egocentric reasoning. More so, some studies have found ego-oriented athletes tend to endorse injurious and unsportsmanlike play (Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Tod & Hodge, 2001).

There is also research suggesting that the moral atmosphere plays a key role toward influencing moral thinking and behavior (Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Kavussanu, Roberts, & Ntoumanis, 2002; Shields, Bredemeier, Gardner, & Bostrom, 1995; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996). The moral atmosphere is essentially the shared values, norms, and meanings of a particular group (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). In the context of sport, players, coaches, and parents are key figures that comprise the moral atmosphere. Guivernau and Duda (2002), for example found that among significant figures that make up the sport moral atmosphere, pro-aggressive teammates and coaches were influential toward a player’s likelihood to aggress.

In summary, research on athletes’ moral reasoning strongly suggests the current nature of sport does not lend itself to moral character development. Despite empirical evidence that diminishes sport’s potential for character development, many continue to argue that a major purpose of participation in sport is character development. This is evidenced by literature, programs, campaigns, and mission statements from major sport organizations (e.g., Champions of Character, 2000; Clifford & Feezell, 1997; Martens, 2004; Pursuing Victory With Honor, 2006; Winning with Character, 2006). Maintaining the “sport builds character” ideology is perhaps not surprising given participation in both European and American sport was legitimizened and popularized based on the belief that sport could...
foster character development. Notions about sport as a character-building medium have long been ingrained in European and American cultures since the mid to late 1800s (Rader 2004; Sage, 1988).

Unfortunately, there is little evidence (empirical or anecdotal) demonstrating the success of the various character development efforts. Instead, signs point to the continual existence of a win-at-all-cost mentality and a lack of moral character. For example, recently, as a result of numerous unsportsmanlike incidents in college football, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) met with the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) and game officials to discuss new strategies for improving the practice of sportsmanship among coaches and players (Richardson, 2006). Rampant use of steroids and other illicit performance enhancers taken by athletes in a variety of sports and across multiple levels (professional, collegiate, and interscholastic) also strongly suggests poor character development (Fainaru-Wada & Williams, 2006; Lumpkin et al. 2003). For many, doing whatever it takes to win seems to be favored over moral character and sportsmanship.

As one step toward increasing moral character development in sport, this study aimed to attain a deeper understanding of how athletes morally reason about various types of ethical dilemmas in sport. Specifically, a qualitative approach was employed using a sample of items from the HBVCI and two newly-created items. The use of items from the HBVCI was motivated by the prevalence of studies and other writings involving the instrument. To date, studies using the HBVCI have relied on reporting quantitative scores that are generated from the instrument’s use of a Likert scale. In general, it is simply known that athletes tend to agree with gamesmanship/unethical play. Little is known about the reasons why athletes believe winning is more important than playing with moral character and valuing sport as a “practice” (i.e., Arnold, 1994). As a result, this study was guided by the following overarching research questions: 1) How do elite level college athletes morally reason about gamesmanship and other unethical events that occur in sport? 2) Who among the moral atmosphere in sport do athletes believe impact their moral reasoning?

Of note, some studies have found females to morally reason at a higher level than males (Beller, 1990; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Breidemeier & Shields, 1986; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001). However, this study did not investigate potential gender differences given the small qualitative sample and the fact that the sample was not balanced between males and females (i.e., 10 females and 5 males). Some studies have also found that athletes with more athletic experience express lower moral reasoning scores (Stoll & Beller, n.d.; Shields & Breidemeier, 1995; Shields, Breidemeier, Gardner, & Bostrom, 1995). Again, the sample size was not conducive to comparing different classes (e.g., freshmen versus...
For the purpose of this study, athletes’ moral reasoning was studied more generally.

It should also be pointed out that others (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986; Tod & Hodge, 2001) have assessed moral reasoning qualitatively, however, these studies examined reasoning about “aggression” rather than various types of gamesmanship strategies and other moral dilemmas that commonly occur in various sports (e.g., the volleyball scenario presented earlier). Qualitatively assessing responses to items from the HBVCI should provide an important, additional perspective on athletes’ moral reasoning and moral character. Attaining a better understanding of why athletes do or do not support moral idealism in competition will provide critical insight into how moral character can be more effectively developed.

Methods
Participants/Sampling
In order to obtain both a deep and broad understanding of how athletes morally reason in competitive sport, a purposeful (non-random), maximum variation sampling technique (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) was used consisting of \((N=15)\) Division I-A college athletes \((n=10\) females; \(n=5\) males) from a variety of sports. To clarify, maximum variation sampling is a qualitative sampling technique used to obtain participants with a variety of backgrounds and characteristics. It is argued that interviewing athletes from a variety of sports would provide a broader understanding of how athletes morally reason as opposed to interviewing athletes from a single sport. Specifically, there were men’s swimming \((n=2)\), women’s swimming \((n=2)\), women’s golf \((n=1)\), men’s baseball \((n=1)\), women’s volleyball \((n=1)\), men’s tennis \((n=2)\), women’s tennis \((n=3)\), and women’s track \((n=3)\). The ages of participants ranged from 19-23. Their race was 73% Caucasian, 20% African American, and 6% African.

It should be noted that the study ideally desired 2-3 participants from each sport mentioned above, as well as a balance of male and female athletes. However, women’s teams were slightly easier to access. Attempts were made to recruit athletes from men’s football, women’s basketball, and women’s softball. However, we were unable to procure any participants.

Procedure
Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Human Subjects Review Committee at Florida State University. Permission was also obtained from the developers of the HBVCI to use a sample of items. Athletes from a Division I-A university were recruited to participate in two ways. First, some athletes were personally approached before or after practices by the first author and solicited their participation. Second, some
athletes were recruited via email messages. All athletes were explained the nature of the study and that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Interviews were conducted in the first author’s office and tape recorded. All participants were offered the opportunity to ask questions about the study following the interview.

**Design**

A qualitative approach was used to explore in depth how college athletes morally reason about gamesmanship strategies and moral dilemmas. Qualitative studies are appropriate when the researcher is interested in openly exploring a particular phenomenon with depth and detail (Patton, 1987). Additionally, the researchers employed both emic and etic perspectives which are part of ethnography. To clarify, an emic perspective is when the research seeks to understand the participants’ unique views and ways of thinking. Specifically for our study, an emic perspective was used to gain an understanding of the athletes’ competitive culture from their point of view. Concurrently, an etic perspective was employed to interpret the athlete’s competitive culture and moral thinking from the researcher’s viewpoint. In other words, the etic perspective is the researcher’s external interpretation of how the participants think and feel (Creswell, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Notably, this study did not fully engage in ethnography, however, Creswell (1998) has acknowledged that researchers sometimes mix or use parts of different qualitative approaches.

**Data collection**

One-on-one interviews were conducted with all 15 participants. Interviews were conducted on one occasion and ranged from approximately 20-45 minutes (depending on how explanatory and open the athlete was in the interview). During the interviews the lead author presented six different gamesmanship/moral issues to each athlete. Of the six scenarios, four were general moral issues and two involved specific gamesmanship strategies. Using a combination of moral dilemmas and gamesmanship strategies is consistent with the nature of the HBVCI. To clarify for the reader, these different types of scenarios have not proven to be related to different constructs. Instead, validity testing has shown items to represent moral character more generally (Hahm et al. 1989).

An example of a moral issue (not gamesmanship) that is part of the HBVCI and used during the interview is the following (shown previously on page 3):

During a volleyball game, player A hit the ball over the net. The ball barely grazed off player B’s fingers and landed out of bounds. However, the referee did not see player B touch the ball. Because the referee is responsible for calling rule violations, player B is not obligated to report the violation.
The above example is considered a moral dilemma because athletes must make a difficult choice between the moral values of honesty versus the non-moral value of winning the match. In contrast, one of the gamesmanship scenarios presented states:

During a college basketball game, player A drives through the lane to the basket. Player B on the opposing team purposely fouls player A, who is regarded as a poor free throw shooter. Player A is awarded two shots and misses both. Intentionally fouling player A was good strategy on the part of player B.

The gamesmanship scenario can also be considered a moral dilemma because of conflicting values. In the above example, athletes must choose to either uphold the moral value of responsibility (i.e., the responsibility of players to compete within the constitutive and prohibitive rules of the game) or the non-moral value of winning. The gamesmanship scenario, however, also involves the intentional use of a dubious strategy to win.

Of the six scenarios, four were from the HBVCI. The selection of these scenarios was based on the types of moral/gamesmanship issues that are the most prevalent in competitive sport (see Appendix A). The two additional scenarios were created specifically for the study (see Appendix B). One new scenario involved gamesmanship and the other was a more general moral issue. The gamesmanship scenario involved a popular strategy called trash talking (Simons, 2003). Lumpkin et al. (2003) defined trash talking as “the verbal act of berating the opponent” (p. 59). This scenario was developed to reflect a current gamesmanship practice not contained in the HBVCI.

The other scenario developed was a moral dilemma concerning a golfer being hit by their own ball when no-one else saw. This scenario was created to represent a moral issue involving an individual sport athlete. All but one scenario on the HBVCI relate to team sports. The individual sport scenario on the HBVCI involves an unethical swimming strategy. We asked an elite college level swimming coach to review the scenario. The coach indicated the strategy is no longer practiced and therefore we opted to develop a new individual sport scenario. Although the scenario was not rigorously validated, the scenario was created by two avid golfers and furthermore, the collegiate golfer we interviewed concurred that the scenario was realistic and legitimate. The trash talking scenario has also not been extensively validated however, given the common use of trash talking we felt it was a valid gamesmanship issue to pose to athletes. More validation of the two new scenarios may be needed in the future.

After athletes were read each scenario, they were asked to agree or disagree and explain why. Sometimes athletes were asked to clarify or explain their answer further if it was
unclear why they agreed or disagreed with the particular issue. Following the athletes responses to the scenarios, they were asked to consider any significant people in their life that have influenced or continue to influence their views concerning the importance of winning versus fair play (e.g., coaches, parents, and teammates). This question was posed for the purpose of considering the impact of the moral atmosphere on moral reasoning.

Data analysis
The interviews were recorded on audiocassette tape and transcribed verbatim onto word processing documents. Each interview was then read in its entirety to obtain a general sense of how athletes responded to the scenarios and interview questions. An inductive analysis was then conducted to determine emerging patterns or themes (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1987). More specifically, athletes’ responses were compiled in relationship to each moral/gamesmanship scenario. For example, all of the athletes’ responses to the first scenario were copied from each interview transcript and transferred on to a single document. The responses were then analyzed for emerging patterns or themes that be could placed into categories. This analytical technique was done for each scenario.

Results
Overview
Consistent with previous studies using the HBVCI, athletes tended to “agree” with the moral/gamesmanship scenarios (Beller & Stoll, 1992, 1995; Beller et al. 1997; Penny & Priest, 1990). Furthermore, an inductive analysis of athletes’ explanations of why they agree produced 23 moral reasoning categories, including one category called “miscellaneous” because the authors were unable to establish a definable category for one particular response. There were also a smaller number of cases in which athletes “disagreed” with the actions taken in the scenarios. Their explanations yielded seven different moral reasoning categories which include “illegitimate win”, “wrong because everybody saw”, “would want the same from their opponent”, “fundamental rule”, “not part of the game”, “play instead of talk”, and “gentlemen’s game”. Additionally, a few athletes indicated they were “unsure” if they agreed or disagreed. Emerging themes from the unsure responses were consistent with categories developed from the agree responses. Consequently, the unsure responses were placed under various agree categories. For example, for the first moral scenario concerning the referee missing a call in a volleyball game, a male swimmer responded with “unsure” but said that it is the referee’s responsibility to make the call, not the player’s. As a result, the response was placed under the category called “referee’s responsibility” which was part of the agree responses.

The moral atmosphere of sport was also explored by asking athletes to identify people that have played an influential role in their moral thinking in the context of sport. From
the athletes’ responses three themes/categories emerged, which included parents/family, coaches, and teammates. There were also two athletes that did not clearly identify a particular influential person and one athlete that said “nobody” has influenced their moral reasoning in sport.

What follows next are the specific categories and supporting quotes that were derived from the interview responses to each moral scenario, as well as some supporting quotes related to the moral atmosphere categories. The reader should note that the categories were primarily based on direct wording from the athletes. Thus, the categories were based on an emic perspective. Also, the reader should note that in order to fit the abundance of collected data into an article, the authors have chosen to report results from three of the six moral/gamesmanship scenarios. These scenarios were selected on the basis of which scenarios were the most representative of gamesmanship and moral idealism in sport. Two of the scenarios came from the HBVCI and the third (trash talking scenario) was developed by the researchers.

Additional points of clarification include: a) categories containing a minimum of two athlete responses were selected for reporting; b) two quotes per category are described due to space limitations; c) in some cases athletes’ responses overlap into more than one category; and d) some categories/themes emerged across more than one moral/gamesmanship scenario.

Scenario 1: Volleyball-Referee Misses Call

A total of 12/15 (80%) athletes agreed it the referee’s responsibility not the player’s. From their explanations of why they agreed, five major categories emerged. The categories included referee’s responsibility (nine athletes), winning is important (five), depends on situation (five), opponents would do the same (two), feelings of guilt (two). There were also 2/15 (13%) athletes that disagreed producing one category called “illegitimate win” and 1/15 (7%) athletes that was unsure. The unsure response was categorized under “referee’s responsibility.”

Referee’s responsibility. There were nine athletes who agreed (and one athlete unsure) that it is not the volleyball player’s responsibility to tell the referee they missed a call; rather it is the “referee’s responsibility.” A female tennis player stated, “Because in any sport it is the referee’s responsibility and you are not expected to call it on yourself.” Additionally, a female swimmer said, “I agree it’s the referee’s job to see that and if he misses it, who cares.”
Winning is important. There were five athletes who agreed it is not the volleyball player’s responsibility to tell the referee they missed a call because “winning is important.” Illustratively, the baseball player stated, “You’re out there in college trying to win. The emphasis is on winning.” Or, a female tennis player said, “To me, tennis is my life and I want to win. I don’t accept losing. Losing to me is not an option. I want to win.”

 Depends on situation. There were also five athletes who agreed it is not the volleyball player’s responsibility to tell the referee they missed a call but that it “depends on the situation.” Demonstratively, a female tennis player asserted,

“It depends on the situation you’re in. I think if you’re winning an easy match and it’s not going to hurt you in any way, you just tell the ref….But if you’re in the finals of a big tournament and the score is really close I would definitely not say anything.”

Equally, the baseball player said, “Yeah, if we’re just messing around and it was just for fun I would say it hit me. But not in competition.”

Opponents would do the same. Two athletes agreed it is not the volleyball player’s responsibility to tell the referee they missed a call because their “opponents would do the same.” For example, the volleyball player stated, “I don’t think that I would report it because I know that most others probably wouldn’t report it.” The other athlete, a female swimmer said, “But then again if it was a tough game, then it didn’t touch my hand. I hate saying that but it’s the truth and I think that a lot of people would feel that way.”

Feelings of guilt. There were also two athletes who although they agreed with the scenario, also indicated they might feel guilty about not being truthful. A female swimmer for example acknowledged, “It’s the game, but I think I would feel too guilty if it went off my hands.” The other athlete was less certain about her feelings of guilt but commented,

“I don’t know if I would feel guilty if that was me player B and it hit my hand and we won the game because the refs didn’t call it. I don’t know if I would feel guilty or not.”

Disagreed. There were two athletes who disagreed with notion that it is the referee’s responsibility rather than the player’s to call the ball out. Both responses fell under the category of “illegitimate win.” For example, a female track and field athlete said,
“Because it’s ethics. You know like if you know it grazed your hand you should say something. It’s not cheating because the referee calls it in the rule book but it’s cheating your team because if like that call had been the game one way or the other, then you really didn’t win.”

The female golfer affirmed, “Because I would feel like it was cheating. … I would assume that everybody would agree to that kind of thing.”

Scenario 2: Intentional Foul in Basketball
A total of 14/15 (93%) athletes agreed with the intentional foul scenario. From their explanations of why they agreed, four major categories emerged. The categories included good strategy (12 athletes), part of the game (seven), depends on severity of the foul (four), and opponents would do the same (two). There was also 1/15 (7%) athletes that was unsure about the scenario. This athlete’s response was categorized under good strategy. There were no athletes that disagreed.

Good strategy. There were 12 athletes who agreed with the intentional foul because it is “good strategy.” A female track and field athlete asserted,

“That’s the game. It happens all of the time. That’s what you do. You study the other team and you know who shoots well. Like that’s just like double guarding the best shooter. You’re going to guard them because you’ve watched tapes. So that’s just like playing the game right. … I think that was a good strategy actually.”

Also, a male tennis player shared the following:

“I’ve played a little junior high basketball and that’s what they taught. That’s what I was taught to do. I would say it’s within the rules, strategy in way. I would say it’s smart and I would have done it every time.”

Part of the game. There were seven athletes who agreed with the intentional foul because it is “part of the game.” For example as part of his response, a male tennis player said,

“I mean if I was playing against the Heat or whoever and we’re playing a game or whatever I’d foul Shaq and make him shoot the free throws because that’s his weakness. You want to expose someone’s weakness. I think that’s the game.”
Additionally, a female volleyball player commented “…And it has become part of the game of basketball to know what your opponents’ strengths and weaknesses are and a lay-up vs. two free shots is a big difference and I think it’s completely right.”

**Depends on severity of foul.** There were four athletes who agreed with the intentional foul but noted that their agreement depended on the “severity of the foul.” For instance, the baseball player stated, “If the foul wasn’t belligerent then I agree. But if it was intentional like he was going up for a shot and he tries to club him over the head then I disagree.” Similarly, a female swimmer posited,

“I think that if it’s blatantly obvious and you injure someone because of it, then I think you’ve taken it too far and something should be called on it but if it’s just standing in the way and getting knocked over, I don’t see anything, I don’t think that’s the worst thing you can do.”

**Opponents would do the same.** There were two athletes who agreed with the intentional foul because they felt their “opponents would do the same.” A female tennis player noted, “I mean the other team, they could do the same to you too and foul the worst free throw shooter.” The second athlete, a female tennis player, also mentioned the idea of both teams having an opportunity to intentionally foul but did so with an analogy in her own sport. As part of her explanation, she said, “If she can’t handle that it’s not really my problem. If she couldn’t handle it her teammates would have come and done the same thing to me and I’m sure she would have been happy if she won that way.”

**Scenario 3: Trash Talking in Football**

A total of 11/15 (73%) athletes agreed that player A should use trash talking to help his team win. From their explanations of why they agreed, six major categories emerged. These categories included mental toughness (seven athletes), good strategy (six), disrespectful trash talking (six), part of the game (five), it’s not cheating (five), and fires them up (two). There were also 3/15 (20%) athletes who disagreed with the use of trash talking. Two categories were developed based on their responses which included not part of the game (one athlete) and play instead of talk (two). Lastly, 1/15 athletes were unsure about the use of trash talking to win. Based on the athlete’s overall response, he (male swimmer) was placed under the category of mental toughness.

**Mental toughness.** There were seven athletes who agreed with the use trash talking on the basis that opposing players need to be “mentally tough.” For instance, a male tennis player remarked,
"I agree. I think a big part of sport is mental…. I think it’s something you can use to your advantage. The guy should learn to forget about it and put it aside but if you find it’s a weakness, he needs to control himself. It’s a good advantage to use."

Additionally, the baseball player noted,

"That has nothing to really do with the game itself. It’s just the player trying to get in the other guy’s head and big time college or any college sport they’ve got to be mentally tough to block that kind of stuff."

**Good strategy.** There were six athletes who agreed with the use of trash talking because it is “good strategy.” To illustrate, a female track and field athlete said,

"It’s just like a strategy to get inside somebody’s head if they’re dropping the ball….I just think it’s all strategies and a lot of people mess with you and talk down to you to get into your head, even coaches do it to get you mad to get you pumped up to play so I think it’s fair."

A male tennis player pointed to the idea of good strategy by giving a personal example. He explained,

"…On the tennis court, there’s been cases or times where there would be an argument or something and then the next change-over one of the guys will say something to me or maybe I make a comment to one of them later on and it helped me because they are still thinking about that comment, thinking about that argument and they lose focus of the game. They lose focus of their trying to win so it kind of takes them out of the game and takes them out of focus."

**Disrespectful trash talking.** There were six athletes who agreed with the use of trash talking but acknowledged that some forms of trash talking are disrespectful and should not be used. A male swimmer, for example, stated,

"I can’t see myself doing it but then again I can see someone else doing it and it’s not like I see something totally wrong with it unless it’s obscene or vulgar, I don’t think that should be in sports at all."
Similarly, a female track and field athlete commented,

“I don’t think vulgar language… I think it’s just inappropriate but if you’re just making comments like, ‘I’m gonna beat you.’ I don’t even know why you would do stuff like that but if you were to I don’t think anything is wrong with that.”

**Part of the game.** There were five athletes who agreed with the use of trash talking because it is “part of the game.” A female swimmer acknowledged, “Yep, I think its part of the game. That’s totally to psyche out, totally. I’ve been psyched out so many times, I don’t do it but I’ve seen people do it and it’s just a psyche out method.” Likewise, a male swimmer stated, “However, watching the game and hearing about it, I wouldn’t say it’s that wrong though because it’s just part of the game.”

**It’s not cheating.** There were also five athletes who agreed with the use of trash talking because “it’s not cheating.” Consider, for example, a female tennis player who said, “But there is no rule saying you can’t do it so if you figure that is a way to win the game, you can do it. You’re not doing anything wrong.” Additionally, the baseball player commented, “It’s not you tripping them at the line or doing anything unfair you’re just using verbal action.”

**Fires them up.** There were two athletes who agreed with the use of trash talking because it “fires them up.” A male tennis player explained,

“I mean sometimes it just helps you, it gets to your opponents. Sometimes it doesn’t but it kind of helps you keep motivated, keep fired up on the court, keep yourself going so it kind of helps in a lot of areas.”

The other athlete, a female tennis player, said,

“Like on the court, we’re not allowed to directly pump our fist to the person, it’s illegal. We have to turn around and do it or if they’re [referees] not watching. But I think there are times that if you don’t pump yourself up, if you don’t you know…”

**Disagree.** There were also three athletes who disagreed with the use of trash talking to gain an advantage. These athletes’ responses were categorized under “not part of the game” and “play instead of talk.” The athlete comprising the “not part of the game” category asserted,
“No, I don’t agree with that. Because that’s not part of the game. Trash-talking is not what football is all about. No. If that makes the other person do worse than he should do otherwise and that’s not even part of the game; I don’t think that’s right even if they win because of it.”

The other two athletes’ responses were grouped under “play instead of talk.” One of the athletes was the volleyball player who said, “I disagree. I am completely against trash talking, I think that’s arrogant they should choose to walk instead of talking it. I’m not a fan of trash talking.” The other athlete was a male swimmer who remarked, “I hate trash talking. Because most of the people who use trash talking in professional sports don’t have the skills to shut an opponent down, they have to get into their heads.”

Moral Atmosphere in Sport

Parents/Family. There were eight athletes who identified parents (six identified parents in particular) or family in general as being influential toward their moral reasoning in sport. However, few athletes were explicit about what their parents taught (e.g., fair play, winning at all costs, etc.). Most only generally stated that their parents were influential. Some of the more explicit responses related to the competitive nature of their dads. As an example, a female a tennis player said,

“My dad. He is the most competitive person on earth I’ve ever met in everything. Not only sports, he wants to compete in everything. And he is the person who really got it my head that there is nothing else but winning. That’s all there is. Everything was winning.”

Also, a female swimmer noted, “My parents, my dad big time. He is the most competitive person I’ve ever met. And he would probably never admit it. His competitiveness has gotten in me big time.”

Coaches. There were seven athletes who acknowledged coaches may influence moral reasoning. However, it should be pointed out that most of these athletes did not directly identify their current coaches or even past coaches. Instead, they spoke about coaches more generally and as a result, it was unclear how coaches or their present coach have directly impacted their moral thinking.

Specifically, three athletes mentioned that some coaches attempt to develop leadership or sportsmanship. Two of these three athletes also stated that some coaches emphasize winning at all costs. For example, a male swimmer said,
“I don’t have any external [influential people] everyone has their own mind, they can think what they want, but a lot of people are influenced by different coaches, like what coaches think. Some coaches want you to win at all costs. And some coaches want you to be that best athlete that you can, have the best sportsmanship, don’t cheat and stuff like that so I can see how coaches can be an external factor.”

The other four athletes did not indicate anything concerning coaches exhorting cheating or fair play. Rather, they made more general mention about coaches being influential toward an athlete’s competitive thinking. For example, the baseball player said,

“My junior varsity basketball coach was more about playing hard. Like he kept charts on just the little things in the game, like charges taken, rebounds - just the little things…. but if we still lost the game it wasn’t a big deal because he was satisfied in the way we played. So I mean, yeah, he was a cool guy…”

Teammates. There were three athletes that identified their teammates as being influential toward their moral reasoning. Again, athletes were somewhat ambiguous in their responses. They indicated teammates as an influence but did not clearly describe the nature of it (e.g., to compete fairly or unethically). For example, the volleyball player said, “I think my teammates would be an external influence in the bigger picture and as far as morally and my beliefs and self consciousness I guess would be factors as well.” Additionally, a female swimmer, pointed to a couple of teammates, one that is hard worker and a “great person” and another teammate that tends to slack off and “cheats her way through practice.” She explained further,

“There was one girl in HS who did everything the right way, competed well, didn’t always win, but always did her best in everything and I admire her so much because she does get the work done….Whereas there is another girl on my current team who doesn’t put the work in and cheats her way through practice, gets out of the water in the middle of practice, and she has to sit out because she doesn’t feel like doing the workout. And yet, she competes on the same level as this person who does everything the right way and I have a hard time seeing this person succeed when someone who I know tries so much harder than this other person but isn’t more successful than this other person.”

This athlete never explained how either of her teammates influenced her moral reasoning, however, the fact that she wanted to share those experiences and feelings, implied that the athlete was suggesting her hard-working teammate has had a positive impact on her moral thinking.
Ambiguous responses. As noted, there were two athletes who provided responses that did not clearly identify an influential figure. For example, one athlete, a female tennis player said,

“I’m the youngest in my family. My sister was seven years older and my brother 11. My sister was a very good tennis player too and my brother… so in order to be noticed I had to be better. But I did not compete with my sister or my brother; I just wanted to compete for myself.”

The athlete mentioned particular family members but did not clarify if her brother and sister influenced her moral thinking. It is acknowledged later in the discussion section that more probing and clarifying should have been employed in cases as such.

Nobody. Lastly, there was one athlete, a male tennis player who felt no one in particular has had an influence on his moral reasoning. When asked if there are people that have had an impact on his moral reasoning in sport, his response was simply, “I would say no.”

Discussion
The major purpose of this study was to attain a deeper understanding of how college athletes morally reason in competition and to determine if athletes appreciate the “practice view of sport.” Additionally, our study sought to ascertain who among the sport moral atmosphere plays an influential role in athletes’ moral reasoning.

Overall, athletes tended to agree with the actions in the scenarios suggesting the majority do not support a deontological or morally principled perspective in the context of competitive sport. These results are consistent with previous studies that have used the HBVCI to study moral reasoning of athlete populations (Beller & Stoll 1992, 1995; Beller et al. 1997; Penny & Priest, 1990; Rudd et al. 1997).

Qualitatively, there were a number of emergent moral reasoning categories that may help explain why athletes are typically inclined to support practices such as trash talking, intentional fouling, or the deferment of moral responsibility to referees. Some of the more salient categories (those containing a large number of athlete responses) that emerged across the different scenarios included: 1) referee’s responsibility; 2) winning is important; 3) other team/coaches’ responsibility; 4) part of the game; 5) good strategy; 6) depends on situation; and 7) mental toughness.

How the emergent categories relate to moral reasoning in sport can better be understood by the previous work of Bredemeier and Shields (1984, 1986). They postulated that the
way in which competitive sport is structured may cause athletes to suspend or “bracket” their normal sense of moral obligation to consider the needs and well being of others (i.e., their opponents). As a reflection of this bracketed morality, athletes are believed to employ the use of “game reasoning” which can be characterized as a selfish, egocentric form of thinking.

According to Bredemeier and Shields (1984, 1986), there are several features of sport that may encourage game reasoning. These include the following: 1) sport is a context separate from daily life and as result what happens in sport is inconsequential to daily life; 2) coaches and officials hold most of the decision making power, thus requiring the players to make few decisions of their own; and 3) the prohibitive rules of each sport regulate for the players what is fair and foul. These features make it convenient for athletes to abdicate their responsibility to uphold fair and respectful play.

Many of the categories identified are clearly indicative of game reasoning and influenced by the way in which sport is structured. For example, many athletes said it is the “referee’s responsibility” to make the correct call with regard to the volleyball scenario. Such responses lend support to Bredemeier and Shield’s (1984, 1986) theory that athletes may suspend their normal sense of moral obligation as a result of the perceived decision making power of the referee.

As another example, several athletes approved of trash talking in sport proclaiming that doing so is “good strategy” and “part of the game.” Such reasoning appears to be reflective of Bredemeier and Shields’ (1984, 1986) supposition that sport is a context separate from everyday life. Trash talking or belittling one’s opponent to gain victory may be acceptable in sport, but may not be in other everyday life contexts such as work or school. The latter point is in fact consistent with Bredemeier and Shield’s (1986) findings in which athletes (high school and college) and non-athletes employed a lower level of moral reasoning when confronted with sport moral dilemmas compared to life moral dilemmas.

With regard to the moral atmosphere in sport, athletes pointed to parents/family, coaches, and teammates as being influential toward their moral reasoning. It is acknowledged however, that the nature of the influence was somewhat unclear. Athletes’ responses suggest that the influence to cheat or play fairly varies among coaches, parents, and teammates. In hindsight, more probing during interviews should have been employed to achieve a better understanding.

The results concerning the moral atmosphere are generally congruent with studies that have examined quantitatively the influence of the moral atmosphere on moral reasoning.
Among studies that have considered the influence of parenting on moral reasoning, Stuart and Ebbeck’s (1995) study may be the only other sport specific study that found parents to be a major influence on athletes’ (youth sport basketball players) moral reasoning. Guivernau and Duda (2002) also considered parents, but did not find them to be as influential as coaches and teammates. As well, Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Pelletier, and Mongeau (1992) only stated more generally that those that make up the social environment (i.e., parents, teammates, friends, and coaches) have an impact on moral reasoning. The specific magnitude of the parents’ influence on moral reasoning was not clearly specified.

The fact that parent/family members were mentioned more than coaches or teammates may also be explained by the possibility that our study was mostly comprised of individual sport athletes whereas other studies have solely involved team sport athletes (Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Shields et al. 1995; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996). More quantitative and qualitative studies to better understand how those that make up the sport moral atmosphere influence athletes’ moral reasoning may still be needed in the future.

In conclusion, results from this study as well as others, strongly suggests Arnold’s (1992) “practice view of sport” is not well appreciated by the typical athlete. Results suggest that athletes are more concerned with the extrinsic reward of winning rather than the intrinsic reward of physical and mental skill testing. This was evidenced by the types of reasons athletes gave for supporting practices such as intentional fouling or deferment of moral responsibility to the referee. Many of the athletes in our sample said, “It’s the referee’s responsibility,” or “It’s good strategy.” Few implied a concern for the practice of sport by mentioning the importance of fair play or the intrinsic aspect of competition.

Athletes from youth sport through college may struggle to appreciate the practice view of sport and employ higher levels of moral reasoning if key figures (parents, teammates, and coaches) in the moral atmosphere encourage winning at all costs. However, those that comprise the moral atmosphere must realize that sport does not automatically necessitate the need to win through dubious or harmful means. In fact, Arnold (1992) pointed out...
that the word “competition” is actually derived from the Latin term “competitio” which means “striving together” (p. 243). The origin of competition suggests then, that sport should be more concerned with the intrinsic value of skill testing in harmony with one’s opponent rather than the extrinsic achievement of winning.

To instill an appreciation for the intrinsic over the extrinsic it is suggested that athletes be exposed to a moral education process that teaches them how to morally judge and act in accordance with moral principles (Arnold, 1994; Rudd & Stoll, 1998; Stoll & Beller, 2006). It is also recommended that those that make up the moral atmosphere (e.g., parents, coaches, and teammates) take responsibility for teaching and modeling good moral character (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995, 2005; Stoll & Beller, 2006). Finally, many coaches and parents may also need to experience moral education.

References


Theoretical information on the HBVCI. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2006, from the University of Idaho, Center for Ethics Web site: http://www.educ.uidaho.edu/center_for_ethics/Measurements/HBVCI/theoretical.htm


Appendix A
HBVCI Scenarios

During a college volleyball game player A hit the ball over the net. The ball barely grazed off player B’s fingers and landed out of bounds. However the referee did not see player B touch the ball. Because the referee is responsible for calling rule violations, player B is not obligated to report the violation.

During a college basketball game, the referee awarded one free throw shot instead of two to team A. Team B knew the call was wrong, however chose to remain silent, knowing the call was to their advantage. Because the official’s job is to make the proper calls, team B’s action was acceptable.

During a college basketball game, player A drives through the lane to the basket. Player B on the opposing team purposely fouls player A, who is regarded as a poor free throw shooter. Player A is awarded two shots and misses both. Intentionally fouling player A was good strategy on the part of player B.

During a college football game, a wide receiver catches a long touchdown pass and scores. The officials fail to determine that the player was ineligible. Because it is the referee’s job to detect the ineligible receiver, the player or the coach does not have to declare an ineligible receiver.
Appendix B
New Scenarios
Player A, a defensive back for the Big Time U college football team believes that the use of trash talking is a good way to diminish his opponents’ playing abilities. In the next game, player A continually talks trash to the opposing wide receivers and causes them to drop some easy passes. Player A should continue to use trash talking to help his team win.

During a college golf tournament, a player hits a ball in a sand trap that bounces back and barely grazes off of her arm. None of her playing competitors see this happen. Under the rules of golf, this is ruled as a two-shot penalty since the rules say a player can't touch a ball once it's in motion. However, since the ball barely touched the player's arm, no advantage was gained, and nobody saw it. As a result, the player decides not to penalize herself. This is an appropriate decision.

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