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).