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## Physical Activity and Sport Issues

**A**fter completing this chapter you should be able to:

- identify the major issues and controversies in the field of sport sociology;
- examine the impact of our “win at all costs” philosophy on a sport participant’s behavior;
- foster a greater awareness of the needs of diverse groups in your community;
- examine personal attitudes and values critically as they relate to modern-day sport and physical activity.

Modern sport, in many ways, reflects modern society. In North America, we are obsessed with the idea of winning at all costs. We strive to get ahead and, in the process, often resort to questionable behaviors to achieve that end. Some people cheat on their taxes, while others undermine their co-workers to get that all-important promotion. We read of instances of road rage after a worker has experienced a frustrating day at the office. Some people turn to drug abuse.

Numerous parallels can be found in modern sport. A famous NFL football coach was once quoted as saying, “Losing is a little like dying.” What kind of effect does this philosophy have on sport behavior? What are some of the negative connotations of trying to win at all costs? What issues and controversies are most problematic in our modern-day sport culture?

The discipline of sport sociology has tackled

these and many other similar questions. **Sport sociology** studies sports as parts of social and cultural life. For example, why have sports in particular groups been organized in certain ways? And how are sports related to important spheres of social life, such as politics, the economy, family, education, and the media? These and similar questions reflect the focus of this field of study. It has examined the problem of aggression and violence in sport, cheating, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, gender issues, equal access for participants, and diversity issues. What have we learned from this extensive research base? Is the overall nature of modern-day sport improving, or is it getting worse? In this chapter, we will attempt to answer these questions by examining some of the most important topics in sport sociology. At the conclusion of the chapter, you should have a deeper understanding of the nature of North American sport.



**Figure 5.1** Sometimes athletes become a little “testy” during a heated contest.

**Table 5.1** NHL suspensions for hockey violence.

Suspension	Description of the Violent Incident
82 games	Marty McSorley of the Boston Bruins for knocking out Vancouver's Donald Brashear by slashing him in the head with his stick (February 2000).
30 games	Chris Simon of the New York Islanders for stomping on the leg of Jarkko Ruutu of the Pittsburgh Penguins (December 2007).
25 games	Jesse Boulerice of Philadelphia for cross-checking Vancouver's Ryan Kessler in the face with his stick (October 2007).
25 games	Chris Simon of the New York Islanders for hitting Ryan Hollweg of the New York Rangers in the face with his stick (March 2007).
23 games	Gordie Dwyer of Tampa Bay for leaving the penalty box to fight with Washington players (September 2000).

## Aggression and Violence in Sport

Few topics in sport sociology have received as much attention as that of aggression and violence. The evening news provides numerous examples of societal violence, from sectarian strife around the globe to terrorist attacks and routine murders. The sports news isn't much better. Hockey provides us with many notable examples (Figure 5.1). In fact, the National Hockey League (NHL) has handed out a variety of player suspensions for violent behavior. Table 5.1 summarizes some of the most severe punishments.

Consider in particular an incident surrounding Tie Domi of the Toronto Maple Leafs: In the waning seconds of Game 4 in the NHL playoffs in 2001, Domi elbowed Scott Niedermayer of the New Jersey Devils. Domi received a 10-game suspension for elbowing and was fined \$1,000. As it turned out, because the Leafs were eliminated from the playoffs, Domi served an 8-game suspension at the beginning of the next season, and he lost \$164,000 of his \$1.68 million salary.

The violence is by no means limited to hockey. In 2004, Ron Artest and Stephen Jackson of the Indiana Pacers charged into the stands to confront abusive fans during a basketball game in Detroit. Artest was suspended a total of 86 games for his part in the incident. In 2000, New York Yankee Roger Clemens threw a jagged piece from a broken bat at Mike Piazza during a baseball playoff game. In 2002, first base coach Tom Gamboa of the Kansas City Royals was attacked by two fans at Comiskey Park in Chicago. He was slammed to the ground and pummeled repeatedly. Teammates rushed to his aid, and Gamboa escaped with only a few cuts and a bruised cheek. Examples such as these can be found in almost every sport.

Before exploring the reasons for this aggressive behavior in sport, it is important to define our terms clearly and succinctly. **Violence** is a term that is usually used to refer to extreme examples of aggression. Aggressive behavior is subdivided into three distinct components. **Hostile aggression** occurs when the primary goal is the injury of another athlete. The intent is to cause bodily or psychological harm and has nothing to do with the outcome of the contest. Anger is usually involved. Hostile aggression is usually performed outside the



rules of the game. **Instrumental aggression**, on the other hand, has the primary goal of achieving some external reward, such as contest victory. No anger is involved with instrumental aggression. Instrumental aggression is usually within the rules of the contest. Finally, **assertive behavior** is a term that is often confused with aggression. Assertive behavior requires increased effort and energy expenditure. There is no anger involved, and there is no intent to harm an opponent.

## What Causes Aggressive Behavior in Sport?

Several causes of aggressive behavior have been proposed. Let's look at the most popular and likely instigators of aggression.

### Parents and Coaches

Many times, parents and coaches encourage aggressive behavior without knowing it. Verbal comments such as "that was a great fight" or "Bob can really take care of himself" give the impression that aggression is acceptable. Similarly, demonstrating interest in televised sporting event fights has the same effect.

**Appropriate Action:** Every effort should be made to convey a negative reaction to aggression.

### Outcome of the Contest and League Standing

Research consistently demonstrates that more aggression occurs after a losing contest. Players are frustrated and often resort to aggressive behavior. In a related fashion, teams that are lower in the league standing usually demonstrate more aggressive behavior. Once again, the source of such aggression is frustration. Moreover, since winning the league championship appears out of the question, players believe there is little to lose by behaving aggressively.

**Appropriate Action:** Coaches need to refocus the team's effort into more productive channels, such as a new game plan or reducing the number of turnovers.

### Point Spread

Closely related to outcome and league standing, the point spread of a contest can also be a factor. The larger the point spread, the more aggression occurs. This is likely because the game is perceived to be out of reach, so taking a penalty will not likely affect the outcome of the contest.

**Appropriate Action:** Coaches and players could take this opportunity to try out a new play that has been worked on in practice. Since the game is already out of reach, nothing can be lost by trying a new strategy. By employing this technique, players will not focus on the point spread or experience the resulting frustration; this will in turn reduce the tendency to resort to aggression.

### Physical Contact

The nature of certain sports tends to encourage aggressive behavior. Sports in which a good deal of physical contact occurs, such as body checks and tackles, tend to result in more aggression. One possible explanation for this is the perceived intent of the opponent. If a player believes that an opponent intends bodily harm, there is an increased likelihood that aggression will occur.

**Appropriate Action:** Coaches should encourage athletes to respond with increased effort rather than aggressive acts. By having athletes focus their attention on greater intensity, it is less likely that they will devote their attention to aggressive responses. This increases the chances of victory – the ultimate way to get back at an opponent!



**Figure 5.2** Fans play an important role in the expression of aggression by athletes.

### **Home Versus Away Games and Fan Reaction**

Research across several sports reveals that more aggression occurs when a team plays away from home. Many writers have linked this finding to fan reaction (Figure 5.2). When a team plays an away game, the crowd they encounter is usually unfriendly and hostile. The verbal taunts and jeering from the crowd may anger the visiting team. This anger often manifests itself in aggressive behavior.

**Appropriate Action:** Coaches and players must learn to “tune out” this fan reaction and focus on the game plan. Athletes should respond to this verbal taunting by applying maximum effort and concentrating on technique. Invite them to use positive self-statements, such as “Way to go! You have really got the crowd’s attention now – keep your mind on your game plan, and the crowd can suffer the consequences.”

A variety of causes of aggression have been outlined in this section. Often several of these interact together to produce aggressive behavior. Coaches, athletes, and parents need to be aware of these instigators and should use the recommendations presented in this section to reduce aggression in sport.

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## **Cheating in Sport**

Cheating is inevitable when there is an overemphasis on winning. Slashing, high sticking, or an excessive body check in hockey are all examples of how cheating can help you win a contest – if you don’t get caught. Cheating can be defined as behavior aimed at getting around the rules or breaking them. Why do athletes engage in this form of behavior? One major researcher in sport sociology suggests that cheating results from the sport ethic. Let’s examine the meaning



of the sport ethic and how it results in deviant behavior.

## The Sport Ethic and Deviance in Sport

The **sport ethic** is a cluster of norms that many individuals in power and performance sports have accepted as the definition of an athlete. Four specific norms constitute the sport ethic.

### **Sacrificing for the Game**

**An athlete makes sacrifices for the game.** Above all, an athlete must love the game and meet the demands of competition without question. This spirit emphasizes that athletes must make sacrifices and be willing to pay the price to play their sports (Figure 5.3).

### **Striving for Distinction**

**An athlete strives for distinction.** The Olympic motto of *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Swifter, Higher,

Stronger) captures the meaning of this norm. Being an athlete requires constant improvement and the pursuit of perfection.

### **Accepting Risks**

**An athlete accepts risks and plays through pain.** Pressure, pain, or fear are never sufficient reasons for abandoning athletic goals. To move up the competitive pyramid, it is necessary to overcome the fear and challenge of competition and accept the increasing risk of failure and injury.

### **Accepting No Limit**

**An athlete accepts no limit in the pursuit of possibilities.** This dream and the obligation to pursue it without question are all that matter. An athlete's very identity is bound up with the belief that sport is an arena of human endeavor in which anything is possible, as long as an individual is dedicated enough.

These four norms, which make up the sport ethic, are deeply rooted in the culture of today's



**Figure 5.3** Athletes make sacrifices for their sport and accept the physical risks associated with competition.



successful athletes. It is conformity to these norms that makes sport participation unique. However, deviance (or cheating) occurs when the norms of the sport ethic are accepted without question. When this happens, a variety of deviant behaviors occur. We will now turn our attention to the most common forms of sport deviance.

## Athlete Recruitment

Rules are often bent if not broken in order to sign promising talent. For example, highly sought-after athletes have “found” envelopes with large quantities of money in their lockers. This technique has been one way to “get around” the rules regarding athletic scholarships.

Similarly, some institutions will “ignore” the required admission standards if the application comes from a highly recruited athlete. In these situations, more deserving candidates may be cheated out of their rightful admission to a college or university of their choice.

## Academic Cheating

Over the years, there have been several highly publicized cases of high-profile student athletes who have had their course work written by “academic support” staff. For the most part, these cases occurred in high-profile revenue-producing intercollegiate programs. These athletes supposedly felt intense pressure to keep up their academic averages so that they would be allowed to continue participating in their sport. However, in this they are no different from other students. The intense pressure to maintain a certain grade point average certainly has the potential to cause an athlete or any student to consider cheating.

## Cheating in Games

In most cases, cheating in games involves trying to get away with as much as possible. One common form of cheating involves the modification of equipment. For example, fencing competitions have been rewired to allow certain athletes to

achieve higher scores. Baseball hitters have been fined for using cork-filled bats. Baseball pitchers often “doctor” the ball by putting saliva, Vaseline, or any other foreign substance on the ball. Other pitchers have used a nail file to scuff the ball. In both cases, this causes an erratic flight of the pitched ball and provides an unfair advantage to the pitcher. Basketball players use the slightest amount of physical contact to throw off an opponent’s jump shot. Some coaches actually teach this technique, to be used when the player is out of the referee’s sight lines. Once again, all of these behaviors are done to increase the chance of ultimate victory.

## Performance-enhancing Drugs

Apparently, many athletes enjoy competitive sports so much that they will do whatever it takes to live up to the expectations of their coaches and fellow athletes. In reality, what this means is that as long as some athletes are willing to take performance-enhancing drugs to gain the winning edge, others will conclude that they must use similar substances just to stay competitive. When an athlete feels the pressure to win is overwhelming, then the temptation to use the “miracle pill” is considerable.

Two notable examples are American sprinters Tim Montgomery and Justin Gatlin, who were recently sanctioned for doping offenses. Montgomery, who in 2002 shattered the world record in the 100 meters in a time of 9.78 seconds, admitted under testimony that he had been using a performance-enhancing drug. He was given a two-year ban from competition, and his world record was rescinded (Figure 5.4). Gatlin, a world-champion sprinter, was given a four-year ban from athletics. His record-tying run of 9.77 seconds in 2006 has been removed from the books.

A wide range of performance-enhancing drugs has been used to gain an unfair advantage in competitive sport. **Amphetamines** have been used to increase muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure. Athletes take these to “get up”