Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies

Chapter 6

Violence in Sports: Does It Affect Our Lives?
Statements about violence in sports may be confusing because people fail to define important terms.
Definition of *Violence*

The use of excessive physical force, which causes or has obvious potential to cause harm or destruction

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- Violence is not always illegal or disapproved.
  - It may be praised as necessary to achieve goals
- When *violence* involves widespread rejection of norms, it may signal *anarchy*.
- When *violence* involves extreme overconformity to norms, it may signal *fascism*.
Violence is primarily about control. Violence works. It makes people do what they otherwise would not. It governs the thin line between life and death. —Allan G. Johnson, sociologist, 2013
Definition of aggression

Verbal or physical actions grounded in an intent to dominate, control, or do harm to another person.

- Aggression is not the same as trying hard or being assertive and achievement oriented.
- Intimidation refers to words, gestures, and actions that threaten violence or aggression.
Violence in sports is not new, but not all sports are violent.

“Now that we’ve invented violence, we need a sport so we can use it without being labeled as uncivilized.”
Violence in sports history

- Research shows that violence was more severe in the past, both on and off the field.
- Rates of sports violence have not increased over time.
- Violence in sports is an issue today partly because it may reproduce gender ideology that privileges men over women at the same time that it endangers many men.
Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words, it is war minus the shooting.

—George Orwell, 1945
Types of on-the-field violence

1. Brutal body contact
2. Borderline violence
3. Quasi-criminal violence
4. Criminal violence
When violence is associated with excellence, athletes may learn to see it as a normal part of sports.
Violence on-the-field as overconformity to the sport ethic (I)

- Coaches may expect players to use violence.
- Violence often attracts media attention.
- Players may not like violence, but most accept it as part of the game.
- Quasi-criminal and criminal violence are routinely rejected by athletes and spectators.

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Violence may be related to insecurities in high-performance sports.
Expressions of violence are related to masculinity, but not limited to men.
Physicality and facing violence creates drama and excitement, strong emotions, and special bonds of mutual support among athletes.
Commercialization and violence

- Some athletes are paid to do violence.

- Commercialization and money expand the visibility of violence in sports and encourage a promotional rhetoric that uses violent images.

- Violence is not caused by TV and money—it existed long before TV coverage and big salaries.
If we want to understand violence in sports, we must understand gender ideology and issues of masculinity in culture.
Violence & masculinity

- Violence is grounded in general cultural norms.

- Violence in sports is not limited to men.

- Playing power and performance sports often are ways to prove masculinity.
Doing violence in sports is not limited to males.

Women UFC fighters disrupt orthodox gender ideology, but reaffirm an emphasis on domination that works to their disadvantage.
Violence in sports and gender ideology

- Doing violence in sports reproduces the belief that “men are superior to women.”
- Power and performance sports, when they encourage violence, emphasize differences between men and women.
- Sports violence reproduces an ideology of male entitlement.
Violence is institutionalized in some sports

- In non-contact sports, violence is usually limited to using violent images in verbal statements.
- Male players learn to use violence as a strategy.
  - In contact sports, enforcers and goons are paid to do violence.
- Female players learn to use violence as a strategy in contact sports, but they don’t use it to prove femininity.
In certain sports, violence is taught as a strategy.

“When are you gonna learn when it’s necessary to use unnecessary roughness?”
Violence is most likely when:

- Sports are organized in ways that
  - Produce hubris
  - Separate athletes from the community
  - Encourage athletes to think that others do not deserve their respect
Pain and injury as the price of violence

- A paradox in today’s sports: People accept violence while being concerned about injuries caused by it.

- Disabling injuries caused by violence are a serious problem in some sports.

- Dominant ideas about masculinity are related to high injury rates in men’s sports.
90% of all serious injuries in college football occur on legal plays.
Brutal body contact, head trauma and brain damage

As research shows that concussions and repetitive sub-concussive head trauma can cause both temporary and permanent brain damage, some people are beginning to question the existence of collision sports.

- Vested interests in these sports are so strong that many people refuse to heed what science is saying.
- There is no form of headgear that prevents the brain from hitting the inside of the skull during violent collisions or rapid head rotation; helmets provide the illusion of safety.
Controlling on-the-field violence

- Brutal body contact is the most difficult form of violence to control.
  - Most injuries occur on “legal hits.”

- The most effective strategies might involve:
  - Suspensions for players
  - Fines for team owners
Ultimate fighting (aka cage fighting) is organized around brutal body contact and borderline violence; rules exist only to remain a legal sport in U.S. states.
Off-the-field violence control vs carryover

Research suggests that the relationship between violence on-the-field and violence off-the-field depends on:

- The meanings that athletes give to their on-the-field actions
- The context in which athletes seek and maintain status off the field
Learning to control violence through sports

Control may be learned if sport cultures emphasize:

- Non-violence
- Self-control
- Respect for self and others
- Physical fitness
- Patience
Assault and sexual assault by males are serious problems in United States and many other societies

- To focus only on athletes distracts attention from the larger problem of violence against women
- Valid and reliable research on the dynamics of such violence perpetrated by athletes is difficult to do
- Sexual assault and rape are vastly underreported crimes due to
  - gender relations
  - popular misconceptions about the meaning of “no”
  - police investigations that are insensitive to rape victims
Research-based hypotheses about male athletes’ violence against women (I)

Violence is related to

1. Support from fellow athletes for using physical force as interpersonal strategy
2. Perceived cultural support for domination as a basis for status and identity among men
3. Social bonds created by collective over-conformity to the norms of the sport ethic

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Hypotheses about male athletes’ violence against women (II)

**Violence is related to**

4. Collective *hubris* among athletes and the notion that outsiders do not deserve their respect

5. The belief that women are “groupies” in sport worlds

6. Institutional support for elite athletes regardless of their actions

7. Institutional failures to hold athletes accountable for deviance
Violence among spectators

- Violence is not usually a problem among spectators watching non-contact sports

- Violence is occasionally a problem among spectators watching collision sports but the causes of that violence varies by situation.

- Evidence indicates that
  - rates of spectator violence today are lower than rates in the past
  - Nearly all sport spectator violence involves men
Spectator violence and the context in which events occur

- Spectators bring with them the histories, issues, controversies, and ideologies of the communities in which they live.
- When tensions and conflicts are intense and widespread, confrontations may occur.
  - Sport events may be used as sites for confrontations.
- Racial, ethnic, and class divisions increase the likelihood of violence.
  - Nearly all spectator violence involves younger men.
The language used by sport spectators refers to violence, but are they violent people?
There is little research on spectator violence in venues where crowds watch events on large outdoor screens.
Research is needed on celebratory violence associated with certain sports. This violence is difficult to control when it occurs in diverse locations away from the stadium.
Spectator violence worldwide

- Violence is always related to the context in which it occurs; it is most likely when:
  - Male spectators are unemployed and alienated from society generally.
  - Groups of male spectators see violent confrontations with police or opposing fans as a means of creating excitement and gaining status.
  - Male spectators use the stadium as a site for expressing nationalism, racism, extreme positions on social issues, political opposition to local or national officials perceived as autocratic and corrupt.
Spectator panics

- More spectators have been killed in mass panics and accidents at sport events than from any intentional violence.

- Panics are linked with many factors, but they are fueled by *emotional contagion*, or the rapid formation of social norms that large numbers of people follow simultaneously.

- The most common factor in deadly panics is a lack of escape routes.
  - When thousands of people flee in fear and hit a blocked exit, people are crushed and trampled.
Post-event violence

- **Celebratory riots**
  - These were often defined as over exuberant fans expressing team loyalty—until someone had to pay for the destruction they caused.
  - Some police forces (in many college campus towns, for example) have learned to anticipate these riots and how to disburse crowds without creating confrontations.

- **Frustration riots**
  - These are rare; they usually occur in response to a perceived injustice that determines the outcome in the final minutes of a game; violence between players often is a precipitating incident.

- Both of these forms of riots are linked with the extent to which a team is a source of spectators’ identities.
Crowd dynamics and situational factors related to spectator violence

- Crowd size
- Composition of crowd
- Meaning and importance of event
- History of relationship between teams
- Crowd control strategies at event

- Alcohol consumption by spectators
- Location of event
- Motivations for attending the event
- Importance of teams as sources of identity for spectators
Controlling crowd violence

Be aware of the following factors:

1. Perceived violence on the field is positively related to crowd violence
2. Crowd dynamics and conditions
3. Historical, social, economic, and political issues underlying spectator orientations
Controlling violence by creating anti-violence norms (I)

- Employ visible coaches and athletes to give anti-violence messages
- Use on field rituals to highlight connections between opponents
- Make spectators aware of anti-violence norms; promote civility towards other fans
- Regulate alcohol consumption

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Controlling violence by creating anti-violence norms (II)

- Limit the use of social control methods that dehumanize spectators or limit attendance
- Law enforcement officials must be well trained
- **Long term control** depends on the extent to which anti-violence norms are established and maintained in stadiums and by people in attendance at events
Terrorism at sport events

- **Terrorism** is *a special form of violence designed to intimidate a target population of people for the purpose of achieving political or social goals*
  - Terrorism occurs most frequently in divided societies or when oppressed populations have an oppositional political agenda
  - Although sport events appear to be likely targets for terrorism due to their visibility and media coverage, few deadly attacks have occurred in recent history—acknowledging
    - Boston Marathon attack in 2013
    - Domestic terrorism at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta
    - Palestinian attack on Israeli teams members at the 1972 Olympic games in Munich, Germany
Terrorism as spectator violence

- Terrorism has occurred at sports events in the past (e.g., 1972 Olympics).
- Current threats of terrorism have increased security at sport venues.
- Understanding terrorism requires awareness of global issues.
  - Sports do not exist in social vacuums.
  - Global problems and hostilities may be expressed in sport crowds.
The threat of terrorism has led to billions of dollars of security expenses at major sport events worldwide.

This is one of the factors that has increased the expenses for host cities and nations.

Here are two of the thousands of police, military, and private security personnel on duty for every minute of the Olympic Games in London.
The cost of terrorism:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Security cost</th>
<th>Cost per athlete*</th>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
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