Chapter 13: Violence

# 13.1. The social psychological dynamics of violence in sports

## Instinct theory and the origins of aggression: Do Sports Control and Moderate Aggression in Society?

Those who argue that sports serve to control aggressive behavior in society generally base their case on:

* assumptions about human instincts
* ideas about how frustration is "released" through sport participation
* information describing what people learn during sport participation

## Human Instincts and Aggression.

Some people continue to believe that all forms of aggressive behavior are grounded in instincts. Theoretical support for this belief is often based on the works of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts. According to Freudian theory, all humans possess a death instinct, sometimes referred to as the "death wish." This instinct takes the form of destructive energy in a person’s psyche. If this energy is not released intentionally, it will build up and be released involuntarily in the form of aggression against self (the extreme form of which is suicide) or others (the extreme forms of which are murder and warfare). The only way to control this potentially destructive energy is to release it safely through an aggressively expressive activity. This safe form of release is called a ***catharsis***, and its operation resembles what happens when steam is slowly released from a pressure cooker; it keeps the pot from blowing up.

Even though Freudian theory leaves unanswered many questions about the nature and operation of the death instinct and the aggression it generates, some people have applied it to sports. They conclude that playing and watching sports allows players and spectators to safely release, or "drain off," innate aggressive energy. Therefore, sports, especially heavy contact and collision sports provide a catharsis for instinct-based aggressive tendencies that inevitably build up over time in human beings.

Many ethologists have used a combination of Freudian and evolutionary theories to make a similar case based on instincts. Ethologists are scientists concerned with the biological foundations of animal behavior. They usually study the behavior patterns of insects, fish, birds, or non-human animals in their natural habitats.

Using their research to explain human behavior, some ethologists have suggested that aggression is a product of evolution and that without aggressive instincts no species (including humans) would survive. Some have stated that humans can safely release aggressive energy through playing and watching sports.

Peter Marsh, a British social psychologist, has expanded the ideas of both Freud and the ethologists to argue that sports events are sites for "ritual confrontations" between fans. After observing young, male soccer fans in England, he concluded that such confrontations are relatively harmless, symbolic displays of aggressive energy. They are highly structured and predictable, and they serve to control the extent to which the fans express aggression in other spheres of life. In fact, Marsh argues that if the aggressive behaviors associated with soccer were suppressed, the rates of violent crime and fighting in society would increase.

The assumption underlying all three of these arguments is that humans are instinctively aggressive and that sports, especially contact sports, provide safe outlets for aggressive behaviors that people must express in some form. This assumption is often built into the language that sportspeople use when they describe their own sports participation. For example, Mike Ditka, an NFL player in the 1970s, an NFL coach in the 1980s, and an NFL TV commentator for football and then a coach once more in the 1990s, explained in these words:

There’s no question about it. I feel a lot of football players build up a lot of anxieties in the off-season because they have no outlets for them... I’m an overactive person anyway and if I don’t get rid of this energy, it just builds up in me and then I blow it off in some other way which is not really the proper way.

In Ditka’s mind, participation in heavy contact sports is a safe outlet that protects the rest of society from potentially destructive expressions of his "natural" aggressive energy.

## Problems with Instinct Theory

The use of instinct theory to argue that sports control and moderate aggression in society suffers from the following four weaknesses.

*First*, research fails to support the notion that aggressive behavior in humans is the product of biologically-based destructive energy. Studies of behavior among insects, fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals have suggested that some aggression among non-human species may be grounded in instincts, but these studies are of little help in developing a theory of human aggression.

Human behavior is more complex than the behavior of other species because it is grounded in a combination of culture, self-reflection, and ever-changing definitions and meanings. Even if someone could make a convincing case that humans have aggressive instincts, this would tell us little about human behavior. We would still have to explain why rates of aggression vary from one group to another, why they vary over time in any single group, why aggression is highly correlated with certain social conditions, and why most human beings have to be coerced or socialized to behave in aggressive and violent ways. In fact, research suggests that the tendency for humans to cooperate is more common than any tendency to be aggressive.

A *second* problem is that instinct arguments often assume that all sports are effective outlets for the presumed aggressive energies of both players and spectators. However, it is quite certain that different sports provide different opportunities to engage in aggressive behaviors. For example, some sports involve no direct physical contact between opponents and provide few opportunities for players to engage in actual aggression.

Much of what occurs in most sports, even in many power and performance sports, would be a poor substitute for real aggression. Furthermore, many athletes define their sport experiences in ways that de-emphasize or eliminate expressions of aggression. This is the dominant pattern in pleasure and participation sports, which have the goal of connecting with others as challenges are faced, rather than overpowering and dominating others in aggressive ways.

The *third* problem with instinct theory is that no research shows that sports participation provides a catharsis for instinct-based aggressive energy. Contrary to the predictions of instinct theory, numerous studies show that contact sports exist and thrive in the same societies that have high rates of aggression and violence. If sports served as a catharsis for aggressive energy, the studies would show the exact opposite.

The *fourth* problem with instinct arguments is that they continually refer to the aggressive behavior of men. They ignore women and the ways that presumed aggressive instincts and impulses might be released through the actions of women. Women are not involved in warfare, group violence, or heavy contact sports to the same extent as men. What, then, are the outlets for their presumed aggressive instincts?

If women turn aggressive energy inward, their suicide rates should be much higher than the rates for men, but this is not the case. If women release their aggressive impulses in other ways, men should use them as role models, because it would make the world a safer place for all of us.

*In summary*, the instinct argument provides no valid support for the notion that sports participation can serve as a cure for violent behavior among athletes or spectators. However, this argument remains popular and many people continue to use a "language of catharsis" in their everyday conversations about human behavior. References to "aggressive tendencies" and "releasing pent-up feelings of aggression" are examples. But those who use this language fail to realize that the theoretical model on which they base their statements is faulty and invalid.

## Frustration-aggression theory

"I had to let some frustration out; otherwise, I was going to kill someone. Better the racket."

This statement was made by professional tennis player Mark Philippoussis when he destroyed his tennis racket after a tough loss during an important tournament.

Some people have argued that since aggression is frequently the result of frustration, and since frustration can be "released" through sports, people will be less aggressive if they play and watch sports more frequently. Of course, it would be convenient if we could deal with all of our feelings of frustration in such a way, and aggression could be controlled by having everyone play and watch sports. But there is no evidence that playing racquetball, soccer, or any other sport eliminates the sources of frustration in a person’s life and makes them less aggressive in the process.

Playing sports may make us physically tired, and it may temporarily relieve feelings of frustration, but no matter how hard someone plays a sport, the situation or person that was the source of their frustration today will still be there tomorrow. Playing sports does not eliminate the frustrating behaviors of others or the sources of frustration at home or work. What about the possibility that vigorous physical exercise in sports enables people to more effectively deal with frustration in a way that makes them less violent? Does vigorous physical exercise produce physiological or biochemical changes in the body?

This is an interesting possibility. People frequently say they feel more relaxed and less stressed after vigorous physical exercise. Some even say they feel as though they have "released" tensions in their bodies. Research shows that among some people, vigorous exercise is associated with reductions in (1) muscular tension, (2) certain forms of anxiety, and (3) depression. However, researchers do not know what causes these changes. Are they direct results of the physiological and biochemical consequences of exercise, or does strenuous physical exercise simply serve as a "time out" in the daily schedules of people who are temporarily bored, busy, or mildly depressed about how things are going in their lives? Additionally, studies don’t tell us if any of the physical and psychological changes that accompany vigorous exercise reduce aggressive behaviors for individuals or rates of aggression in society.

If the intent to do harm or inflict injury on others does decline after a person plays sports, this probably occurs because intense involvement in any activity can put time between a person and the frustrating conditions in the rest of life. During this period, people can calm themselves down or identify rational, non-aggressive strategies for dealing effectively with the sources of frustration in their lives. But the type of activity may not matter; playing a game of chess, meditating, or reading a good book could be as helpful as playing sports if people became intensely involved in these activities. Of course, sports often are played with friends and this means that they are social occasions during which frustrated people can receive advice about strategies for dealing with sources of frustration at home or work. So, in addition to providing a "time out," playing sports may involve social interaction that is likely to discourage the use of aggression in response to frustrations.

It is likely that we often see playing sports as a way to relieve frustration mainly because it involves intense concentration and often produces physical exhaustion. For most of us, participation in sports puts us in a setting separate from the more serious concerns of our daily existence. Gyms, tracks, or golf courses often are worlds of their own. This, along with the heavy focus on physical movement and physical challenges, and the social interaction that often occurs while we participate, makes sport refreshingly unique in most of our lives.

As a woman who recently took up boxing explains, "You’re hitting a bag. You’re not ...in front of a television or reading a magazine. All that frustration from work, you’re getting rid of it". Of course, she does not claim that boxing eliminates the sources of frustration in her life, or that it makes her less aggressive; she just says boxing makes her feel less frustrated when she leaves the gym. And unless her fellow boxers tell her to punch her boss’s lights out, she is likely to think of non-aggressive ways of handling things at work tomorrow.

However, not all people leave the gym less frustrated than when they entered. For example, those who use sports as a means of proving themselves rather than expressing themselves often discover that playing sports creates frustration in their lives. When these people lose or play poorly, they may leave the gym or playing field with more aggressive feelings than they had when they began their sport participation.

Just as there is nothing magic or automatic about playing sports and getting rid of frustration, there is no evidence that watching sports eliminate frustration in the lives of spectators. Watching sports may temporarily distract people from things causing them to be frustrated, but this does not make them mellow and less aggressive in the rest of their lives.

*In summary*, it is difficult to argue that people can control aggression by using sports to release or eliminate frustrations. However, there is some support for the notion that sports can serve as a valuable "time out" separating people from the sources of frustration in their lives. We do not know at this point whether this makes them less aggressive. Nor do we know if this occurs on a collective level so that rates of aggression in society as a whole would decline if sport participation were more widespread. Most existing evidence points against this possibility.

## Frustration and tension excitement

For frustration among fans to give rise to aggression, the following three things must happen:

1. There must be enough identification with players or teams to provide the basis for frustration in connection with their fate on the field of play.
2. When fans become frustrated, anger must be the dominant emotion they feel.
3. Opportunities for aggression, stimulus cues, and social support for acting aggressively must be present.

In many cases, individual spectators do not identify with players or teams to the extent necessary to produce frustration. However, when their identification is strong enough and when their frustration is followed by anger, the aggression of spectators is discouraged by the absence of opportunities, stimulus cues, and social support for aggressive actions.

This frustration-aggression model has led to policies that (1) separate spectators from opposing teams during and after games, (2) prevent spectators from bringing to the arena objects that they can throw from the stands, and (3) emphasize an orderly flow of people around the arena.

Contact between angered losers and exuberant winners creates obvious opportunities for violence. Objects that people can throw, such as bottles and cans, can become stimulus cues for violent behavior when an official makes a "bad call" or when players and coaches do not live up to expectations. And the absence of explicit behavioral guidelines for spectators increases the probability that some groups of fans will create their ideas about how they should express their anger.

*In summary*, the playing and watching of sports does regularly generate frustration. Frustration may lead to aggression, but this occurs only under certain conditions. Rules in sports and sports facilities have been designed to limit the opportunities, stimulus cues, and social support for aggression among players and spectators. For example, using a hockey stick, football helmet, or baseball as a weapon brings heavy penalties in most cases. Even the use of intimidation has been regulated in some sports, although this is difficult to do.

Those who benefit from the popularity of certain sports are sometimes hesitant to make rules that discourage spontaneous displays of emotions by players and spectators. Most of us who enjoy sports would not like to see all such displays discouraged, even though we object to aggression on the field and in the stands.

Finally, there is little evidence that aggression resulting from sport-related frustration carries over into non-sport settings. There are cases of bar fights and domestic violence that might be related to such frustration, but there is no systematic research enabling us to say when and how often such carryover might occur.

## Violence begets violence: Cultural patterning theory

Instead of allowing people to release the pent-up energy that instinct theorists say is the foundation of all aggression, contact sports seem to be expressions of the same cultural patterns and orientations that underlie warfare and high rates of murder, domestic violence, and assault. For example, in a carefully designed comparison of ten peaceful societies and ten societies with long traditions of fighting many wars, anthropologist Richard Sipes found that contact sports were popular in 90 percent of the war-like societies and only 20 percent of the peaceful societies. This contradicts the notion that contact sports serve a cathartic function for players or spectators.

Other studies have shown that homicide rates in the United States increase immediately after television broadcasts of highly publicized boxing matches, and that military activity is positively related to the popularity of contact sports in countries participating in the Olympic Games. Historical research in England shows a similar pattern; the level of violence in dominant sport forms has gone hand in hand with the level of violence in a particular society. Sports do not seem to be "draining off" aggressive energy.

# 13.2. Sports violence: More barbaric than you think

Since 9/11 and the U.S. response to the terrorist act that brought down the two World Trade Center buildings and killed over 3,000 people, there has emerged a logic of war and violence in U.S. culture. This logic has been used to justify torture as an intelligence strategy and then to redefine the meaning of torture itself. As part of this process, violence was turned into a news spectacle and there was an increase in violent content in popular culture.

Of course, this is not a new phenomenon, but it now occurs at a point in time when the line between spectacle and reality is easily blurred, especially in terms of the consequences of violence. Popular culture today is saturated with images of violence and opportunities to consume them in multiple forms. People are introduced to the technology of death through everything from children’s cartoons to action films and video games in which violent deaths are common.

Contact sports play an important but generally overlooked part in reproducing the logic of violence in society. They provide visual images of brutal body contact that many people perceive as displays of violence, even if players do not intend to harm each other. But regardless of intentions, players are harmed, sometimes seriously.

Spectators seldom see the consequences of that harm. They may see a player writhing in pain or knocked unconscious on the playing surface, but in most cases, the player leaves the field under his power or with some assistance and fans return to the action without little concern about the impact of such injuries beyond whether they prevent the player from returning to play.

Even more common than the observable injuries are those that fans cannot see and are seldom made public. This is due to the elite sports culture in which players often do not report injuries because they want to continue to play and they don’t want to be seen as “soft” by their peers. Additionally, players don’t want opponents to know they have an injury that makes them vulnerable and teams don’t want opponents to be alerted to strategy changes that would accompany a change in the team’s lineup. As a result, spectators can ignore their complicity in perpetuating this form of barbarism and continue viewing the violence in contact sports as a necessary means to achieving a valued goal – as part of a game in which players perform for their entertainment. In this way, spectators can be entertained by violence without seeing its consequences – much like the violence presented in fictional media content. This, of course, allows them to consume without guilt.

In our so-called “civilized” society, this may be more barbaric than the human sacrifices made on Mayan ball fields and gory deaths of Roman gladiators where people witnessed the consequences.

Apologists for collision and heavy contact sports such as football, ice hockey, and rugby have a difficult time imagining life without regular doses of violent contact between men on the field of play. Injuries, they say, are a part of sports, just as they occur with crossing streets and riding bikes. But crossing the street and riding bikes don’t involve inevitable collisions that damage brains and maim bodies. Nor do they feed our fantasies about war and warriors and come with narratives that describe impulsive savagery during the activity as heroic.

The culture that accompanies a collision sport provides support for violence and, in some cases, does this with formal rewards. This was seen in the NFL during 2011 and 2012 when the league was forced by publicity to investigate a rumored system of financial bounties given to New Orleans Saints defensive players who injured opposing players to a degree that would take them out of the game.

Although the NFL head office and several players stated that there was no place in the league for such a reward system for doing violence with the intent to injure an opponent, other players noted that both formal and informal rewards for engaging in such violence had long been a part of the NFL. An ESPN analyst and former player for the New York Jets tweeted, “This ‘bounty’ program happens all around the league ... not surprising.” A current NFL player concurred by asking, "Why is this a big deal now? Bounties been going on forever.”

Players in the NFL are paid to do violence, and they are old enough to make decisions to put their bodies in harm’s way—although the NFL did systematically withhold information about the consequences of that violence so there are questions about whether the players’ decisions were based on fully informed consent.

Informed consent becomes more of an issue in the case of high school and college players who are not old enough to sign contracts and are playing a violent sport that is sponsored by an educational institution legally bound to protect their well-being. One of the reasons that this has not yet struck a fatal blow to high school football is that parents have socialized their sons to normalize this violence. When you think about it, this is the most barbaric aspect of sports violence today.

# 13.3. Fan violence: Ultras in Italy as a case study

Soccer-related violence in some parts of the world has become a major social issue. This is most likely to occur in regions where the unemployment rate among young men is high, where the policies of autocratic leaders constrain freedoms and allocate public resources in blatantly unfair ways, and where soccer is a central focus in the cultural profile of the area.

The Latin word *ultrā* means *beyond*. *Ultras* is the term used when referring to organized groups of male fans whose actions are fanatical, or *beyond normal*. Ultras are different than *hooligans* – a term traditionally used to identify groups of fans that create occasions to fight with opposing fans, engage in generally destructive actions and often make a game out of evading or confronting police. In the process, they create stories that they tell to enhance their status among friends.

Unlike hooligans, ultras are best known for their fierce formal and public allegiance to a soccer team and club. This tradition can be traced back to Hungary in 1929 when fans formally registered as supporters of a team, paid a membership fee, wore a symbolic badge over their hearts when attending a game, and came together in the stadium to perform organized displays of their team loyalty.

Today, Italy has become known for its ultras. Although Italian fans organized cohesive groups in the early 1950s, the term ***ultras*** was first used in 1969 when fans of a team in the city of Torino organized the Ultras Granada. Over time, ultras in many Italian cities expressed their team loyalty by making banners, flags, and other symbols containing the team logo or their group logo. They engaged in choreographed displays using cards, songs, and chants and waving scarves to present their identities and short

messages (like collective tweets!) inside the stadium and they brought drums, fireworks, and flares to attract attention and create excitement.

These displays were also motivated by a desire to distract or intimidate the opposing team – and out-do opposing fans. Scenes of thousands of ultras waving their signature scarves became common at games, and this expression of team loyalty and identity spread to other fans in the stadium.

As Italy faced social, political, and economic problems during the 1970s, the displays, songs, and chants began to express political dissent and opposition to local and national leaders and policies. Subsequent confrontations with police and security forces involved violence that became a central feature of stadium experiences at many soccer games.

The expressive, creative, artistic, and violent displays of the Italian ultras attracted attention through much of Europe and lead to the development of an ultras culture in the countries close to Italy. The local manifestations of this culture were shaped by the contexts in which they appeared. Political ideologies, often in extreme forms, often influenced the displays and actions of the ultras in many cities. Racism, nationalism, and opposition to ethnic immigrants were other influencing factors in regions where intergroup hostilities were a feature of the social landscape.

Many ultras protested against the commercialization of soccer and the separation of team management from members of the sponsoring club. Opposition to acquiring players from rival countries or disdained ethnic groups has evoked expressive and sometimes violent protests.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the ultras in Italy were among the most extreme. Their displays and use of flares and fireworks in stadiums were spectacular and dangerous. But now they have been copied and frequently outdone by [ultras](http://www.ultras-tifo.net/) in other countries. These displays are generally described by the Italian word, *Tifo*, which means *supporting a team*.

Although the displays choreographed by ultras can be impressive, they often intimidate other spectators and create dangerous situations in stadiums. Ultras also claim areas in and outside of their stadiums and use graffiti to mark them as their turf. When others trespass, it is perceived as a threat to their power and it often evokes violent responses.

The power and influence of the ultras in Italy and other parts of the world has lead team administrators and political leaders to use them for their purposes. However, Ultras may be left or right-wing politically, depending on their primary issues and how they align with local or national political parties.

Ultras, especially those in Italy, have come to be associated with violence because they use extreme actions to attract attention and express their views, whether they are related to politics, the team, of social issues. As the police have used repressive tactics to control Ultras, it has created a legacy of hostility and conflict that continues to be played out in the present.

# 13.4. Violence and animal sports

While most animal and blood sports are illegal in the United Kingdom, as in many other nations, greyhound racing remains a popular leisure pursuit. Greyhounds were used in the eighteenth century for slaughtering native populations in the British and French colonies. Their sporting prowess was subsequently employed in greyhound coursing, a popular English aristocratic pastime in the nineteenth century, where two dogs would compete to chase and kill a hare in open ground.

Today, racing takes place at tracks with an electronic ‘hare’ and is primarily a social and gambling event. While this may appear to be a more ‘civilized’ version of the former activities of these dogs, sociologists Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young (2005) have identified four occasions of violence faced by many racing greyhounds in the interests of ‘sporting’ performance: during breeding, housing, training, and disposal.

For example, there is evidence that dogs deemed unsuitable for racing are abandoned or culled at a very young age. Those that are successful on the track are often stored in cramped, inhumane conditions, isolated from human contact, where they may be exposed to contagious diseases.

On the track, many dogs are raced beyond recommended levels and experience pain and injuries similar to those endured by overtrained human athletes. Some also die during collisions with other dogs – generally smaller female dogs trampled by larger males.

In many cases, dogs will not receive treatment for illness or injuries, because it is cheaper for an owner to abandon a sick or injured dog and buy a new one than it is to provide treatment. There is also evidence that racing dogs have been injected with performance-enhancing substances. Many are not neutered so they retain high energy levels and breeding capacity, but metal devices are inserted into their genitalia to prevent energy expenditure through coitus. Once a dog has ended its racing career, it is disposed of—sometimes through neglect leading to death, and sometimes through euthanasia.

While this is not true of all racing dogs, there is evidence that greyhounds, as with many human athletes, experience violent abuse and victimization such that their well-being is sacrificed in the interests of sporting performance.

This example is not the only case of violence and animal sports in the UK. There have also been recent cases of dog-fighting, and pigeon-racing, polo, and horse-racing (with many animal deaths each year) remain popular legal sports.