

## ETHICS IN SPORTS

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### Abstract

**It is commonly accepted that through sport one learns to persevere, to sacrifice, and to be self-disciplined, to work hard, to follow orders, to be a leader, and to work with others. Competition is not unethical. It is reasonable that winners be rewarded, even if their victories have an element of chance; this is the essence of a game, and games are fundamental to humanity. But the allure of winning can drive some competitors to unethical behaviour. Once upon a time, student athletes were students first, athletes second; the Olympics was about amateurism and the pursuit of excellence, not the pursuit of endorsements; and professional athletes enhanced the physics through rigorous work-outs, not through performance enhancing substances. No doubt athletic excellence is at an all time high, but are ethics in athletics at an all time low.**

**Keywords: Players, Coaches, Spectators and Administrators.**

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### Introduction

Why do we say "it's not the winning but the taking part that counts"? It's a phrase echoed by the founder of the Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who said "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well." Most people seem to agree that trying and failing is more admirable than not trying at all. In practice, though, most people seem only to be interested in the medallists. In young children's sporting events, last place is often rewarded with a 'wooden spoon' or booby prize. Grown-up athletes don't even have this to look forward to. Perhaps 'taking part' is just a myth designed to cheer up the slowest children: to take the edge off failure. Many people would say otherwise. They say that effort, determination and striving to reach a goal are commendable in themselves. It is commonly accepted that through sport one learns to persevere, to sacrifice, and to be self-disciplined, to work hard, to follow orders, to be a leader, and to work with others. Winning athletes are those who combine this good behaviour with natural talent. There are other goals to strive for apart from a medal. De Coubertin himself

coined the motto "Citius, altius, fortius" - "swifter, higher, stronger" - for his Games. It is an ambiguous phrase, and one that could be taken to include striving to beat one's personal best as well as going for gold. Competition is not unethical. It is reasonable that winners be rewarded, even if their victories have an element of chance (and all victories have); this is the essence of a game, and games are fundamental to humanity. Celebrating achievement is not in itself unethical - but it can drive some competitors to unethical behaviour.

We have rules and regulations, with umpires, referees, and judges to apply rules and regulations for every sport. The existence of these rules and regulations is the igniter for many discussions of ethics as it concerns athletes, coaching staffs and management, media, referees, fans and agents.

### Players

In the beginning of the second half of the last century, organized sports were a state policy in many parts of the world with the exception of North America. Football (soccer) became a professional sport in most countries before other sports and only professional soccer players had contracts. Until very late in the century, athletes in other sports were considered amateur, even though they were paid, since they had no contracts or legal documents. In the Soviet bloc countries, almost all of the athletes had state jobs, in police departments or in the military. Although it was common knowledge, nobody did anything. Until the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, NBA players could not participate in the Olympics, because they were professionals. Starting with Barcelona, the IOC changed its rules for amateurism, making it possible for NBA and other professional athletes to participate in the Olympics. For most of the last century, this was a very important ethical problem for players. Now, in most countries, players are professionals, have contracts and play by the business rules. Before that, since there were no contracts, financial matters were always an issue between the players and the management, for neither side had a legal recourse when problems occurred. For instance, a lot of players, including myself, could not take any legal action against the management if they were not paid in full. I have also heard stories where the reverse was true. Where players were paid to transfer to teams but

ended up playing for other clubs who paid more and keeping the money. Can contracts solve these ethical problems? Up to a certain level, yes; but, unfortunately, there are some circumstances where management can force players to accept amendments to long-term contracts after they are already in effect. This may be the case even today. Another ethics issue regarding players is health and use of drugs. The assumption is that the players should take care of themselves and be healthy enough to participate in practices and games. Further, no management or coach should force any player to participate in any activity unless the player is healthy. The health of a player should be more important than any game or practice and the management, either of the clubs or of the governing organizations, should provide healthy environments and safe and proper practice, playing and medical facilities. We cannot overlook doping and drug issues, which are actually two separate and distinct issues. Unfortunately, there are quite a number of professional players who use drugs. Being wealthy and popular at a young age makes a professional athlete very vulnerable in this regard. In addition to considering the athlete's health, we have to be very careful about their images since many successful young athletes are role models for children around the world. As for doping, nowadays, international governing bodies of sports have a long list of forbidden materials that should not be taken before, during or after training periods and competitions. However, this can be a very controversial issue. We have witnessed a small number of cases where innocent athletes have been penalized. In the majority of the cases, however, both players and coaches act in full awareness of the consequences. If an athlete takes a medicine prescribed by a doctor or a physician, it should be declared prior to the competition so that test results cannot be used against the athlete. Obviously, drug usage can be detected in doping tests, too. In many international competitions these tests are taken very seriously. Controversy also arises, however, because some believe and say that chemical and pharmaceutical technologies should be used in full in the preparations of athletes. Since doping is very harmful to an athlete's health, I cannot agree with this group. This brings up another issue. Especially in the USA, the governing bodies of some professional sports are not highly concerned with what kind of medicines or doping materials the players use. Just this year, the diet supplement ephedra was partly to blame for the death of Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler from heatstroke during baseball spring training. This sorrowful incident made many aware

that the issue is more than just important: it is a matter of life or death.

### **Coaching Staffs and Management**

Although these two groups often position themselves against each other when problems occur, I consider them as one group in relation with the players, because, regardless of the entity, the impact and results are often the same for the players. As mentioned earlier in the players section, the management should abide by the rules of the game and the business life. They should not ask personnel to do anything against the rules of the game, nor should they act against the professional contracts signed by coaches or players. Other than what is contained in the contracts, this group should be very open and clear in their actions towards their players. Personalities of individual players should be taken into consideration, but general ethics rules for the club and/or the league should be in effect as well. Coaching staff and management should respect the players and vice versa. Actually, this is a very important issue even at the recreational level. Management's actions towards the players should be unbiased and just. The rules and regulations of any organization should be available to the players, clearly written and not favoring any party. Evaluations should be fair and just and depend on facts and possibly statistics (which are still a very important tool even though Disraeli once said, "There are three groups of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics"). Some sports experts choose only to believe what they see, in part because there are not many standards for sports statistics, especially for a sophisticated game like basketball. In addition, there are some moments in a competition that simply cannot be transformed into a numerical value. For the welfare of the franchise, coaches and management should act ethically, even though, as George Orwell said in *The Animal Farm*, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal". This is true for most players and management. If the management or the coaching staff feels that one player is indispensable, they often act more favorably towards that player. This causes a problem among the other team members, since all players deserve to be acted equally and justly.

### **Media**

In today's world of sports, media is a very important element. It also is the focus of one of the most discussed issues of ethics. How true and unbiased are the evaluations of the media? Does the media always tell the truth about a player or a club? These are just a few of the very basic questions that come to mind. In the USA, the clubs have commentators for TV and

radio, whose comments are based on their knowledge about a specific club or its players. In the early stages of professional sports in my part of the world, it was considered immoral and unheard-of for a media member to announce that he or she was supporting a certain club. Therefore, his comments would be considered unbiased even though he was fully supporting one team against the others. After a while, people started wondering whether this was ethical, although it seemed very moral. After one of the famous journalists started attending the games wearing the colors of the team he supported, and even wrote a book confirming his support, journalists and commentators began to feel there was no harm in publicly declaring their support for a given team. I believe this is more ethical.

Another issue frequently encountered in my part of the world is the occasions where a journalist affiliated with a publication travels with a certain club or team, and where this trip is paid in full by the club instead of the journalist's publisher. Other times managers of a club or sports organization might write the columns in publications. I believe this is a totally different case than a journalist declaring his colors. I do not find these ethical at all.

### **Referees**

This is the most controversial group among the elements of the sports industry. In today's world, where huge amounts of money and/or other valuables are at stake, ethical values are critical for this group. To start with, they should be honest. Then, they should have a fair portion of the cake; however, this should be justly defined and distributed. They should be educated properly by the governing organization and should be treated respectfully. When all these conditions are fulfilled, we would obviously expect this group to perform by the rules. If a referee is underpaid, he may be vulnerable to making decisions in favor of a party that provides him with funds or other benefits, because he has less at stake. Especially in less and underdeveloped parts of the world, there is a prejudice against this group just because they earn the least among all elements except fans. So the character education and evaluation of the referees as well as the general conditions should resemble those for other elements of the relevant sports.

### **Fans**

This is the only group that does not directly earn anything, but, on the contrary, pays to watch sports events. Since they support the game in general or a specific team, some members of this group think that they deserve and have every right to act against the rules and regulations. Hooliganism is a big worry for

organizers almost everywhere around the world. The fans should understand, however, that the opponents have the right to win as much as "their" teams. Supporting a team or a club is very different than believing "everything is fair for my team to win". We have, unfortunately, experienced quite a few incidents when a simple game turned into a war between two neighboring countries or bloodshed between the fans of two archrival clubs. However, here I would like to mention a very favorable incident that I experienced. A couple of years ago, I was visiting London and had a ticket for the FA Cup Final between Arsenal and Newcastle United. Being an Arsenal fan, I felt a little bit uneasy when I found my seat in the middle of Newcastle fans. There were just two or three other Arsenal fans near me; the rest of that section belonged to Newcastle United fans. Arsenal won the Cup 2-0. Exiting old Wembley Stadium, fans walked towards the main entrance and the subway station from the two different sections, but their paths intersected almost a mile from the subway. Arsenal fans were moving silently when the two groups met. I was very surprised when Newcastle United fans started singing "You won the Cup...Cheer up; You won the Cup...Cheer up". This was a very important lesson for all the fans of any age, group or sport.

### **Agents**

Because this group represents the players, they must, for their own sake, try to sign up better athletes. Their relationship with their players and also the club managers and/or coaching staffs should be very ethical. Unfortunately, like in many other businesses, we hear about a lot of controversial actions. Agents should be fair and just to their players, to the managerial group, and to the media. In addition, since the main subject of the transactions of this group is human, the ethics of this group should be very clearly defined and announced. This group is not only responsible for how his/her player performs on the court but off the court as well. We have seen many cases where agents helped their players, but also many where they messed up the life of their players because they failed to see the players as human beings instead of just figures on a piece of paper.

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