

Violence and sports



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For as long as sports have been around, the issue of violence has always played an influential role and raised some controversy. Violence that occurs in and around the sporting world has resulted in severe physical and psychological repercussions for those involved. Mild forms of violence are accepted in some sports such as football and hockey. Participants in these sports, by the very act of taking part, have accepted the “inevitability of rough contact” (Maguire). These participants, however, cannot control injuries sustained from activity that violates the written and unwritten rules of the sport. An example of this occurred in 2003, when football player Bill Romanowski attacked and injured one of his teammates, Marcus Williams, during a scrimmage. Williams was forced to retire after Romanowski confronted Williams after a play, ripped off his helmet, and crushed his eye socket with a punch. Another instance of this occurred in this year’s NHL playoffs when a player named Niklas Kronwall hit a player named Martin Havlat. In the process it is likely that Havlat got a concussion, either from the hit itself, or the fall, or both. Havlat was unconscious on the ice for about a minute and because of the concussion, he missed the rest of the playoffs and some long-term damage may have occurred. Critics claim that violence in sports is a good way to release aggression and that violence draws more attention and improves ratings, but sport commissioners and league officials need to make stricter rules because violence in sports impact society in a negative way, causes long-term damage, and can escalate to other issues.

In the article “Violence and Sports – Ugly but Useful,” psychology professor and author Joseph Maguire discusses how violence is an integral part of

contemporary sports. Maguire claims that aggression and violence are natural and that these two traits are instinctive and inevitable aspects of human behavior. He also claims that, “ sports are seen as a form of catharsis; they allow for the safe and channeled release of the aggression that is part of every person’s instinctive makeup” (Maguire). Take boxing for example the aggressive nature of a boxing contest is an action that will not necessarily be well embraced outside of the sports arena. If two people start punching each other in the middle of the street they will get in trouble, but once they step into a ring in front of an audience, its socially acceptable. Maguire’s claim that violence in sports allows athletes to release aggression is a flawed underlying assumption. What he is saying is that if these athletes could not participate in sports then they would find other ways to release their anger and aggression, such as murder and rape. If this was the case, then retired athletes would all be in jail, and thats rarely ever an occurrence. Not everyone in the world is a violent person and most athletes do not play their sport to release aggression; they play either for money or the love of the game. Maguire also goes into more detail discussing what kind of violence is acceptable in sports. He explains:

“ Borderline violence” consists of behaviors that violate the official rules of the sport but that are accepted by players and fans alike as a legitimate part of the game. Such behavior – a fistfight in ice hockey or an intentional foul in association football’s penalty zone – is rarely subject to legal proceedings and tends to be dealt with by penalties imposed by referees, umpires, or league administrators.

Baseball players get into scuffles all the time. A baseball player can throw a baseball 90 mph at another player's head and then fistfight over the incident and only receive a few games suspension. That is a little ridiculous considering the serious injuries that have occurred. Fights in baseball have resulted in serious injuries that can easily be prevented by a stricter punishment. If the punishment was say, jail-time for example, then baseball players would definitely think twice before fighting. Violence in sports is not an integral part of the game, and the punishment should be much greater than what it currently is.

In the book Media, Sports, & Society, author Lawrence A. Wenner discusses how violence in sports is acceptable because sports spectators love aggression and that it improves audiences and television ratings. Wenner states that serious sports have nothing to do with fair play, "it is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard for all rules, and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence" (275). Despite Wenner's statement being a little extreme, he is correct that spectators do love aggression. For example, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is a league of fighting which includes mixed-martial-arts. It has drawn an overwhelming amount of attention and despite some people calling it "human cockfighting" it has drawn high ratings. UFC's success comes from blood-thirsty fans that enjoy watching violence in sports from their own living rooms. Wenner also explains:

There is a bloodthirstiness in people that manifests itself in mob scenes. People feel safer accepting violence when they are seated in numbers of other spectators. A group of spectators watching an organized event that

they know is going to be violent is far more likely to accept violence and mayhem than bystanders on a street who witness a violent crime. (277)

Spectators may enjoy violence from the comfort of their seats or their home, but what about the athletes that are partaking in the violent events? It is sad that our society has reached a point where people can enjoy watching violence and not think about the repercussions. Many athletes are seriously injured through events that can be avoidable; but audiences enjoy watching aggression and it will continue as long as ratings are up. The society is coming closer to the point when fighting in the street will not be looked on with disdain by the public. The recent surge in staged fights at schools, with the purpose of filming and posting on the internet is another example. Many students do not turn away in disgust at these fights; instead, they egg on the participants and happily record them. It cannot be argued that the majority of sports spectators enjoy aggression and roughness in sports; but in order to save sports, most of the fighting and all the inappropriate aggression needs to be abolished. Fans can still enjoy watching a game without violence and spectators will continue to watch sports even if a stand is taken against violence and the rules are stricter. For example the 2007 Stanley Cup Final featured the Anaheim Ducks and the Ottawa Senators. The two teams were ranked 2nd and 3rd in game misconduct respectively, with Anaheim leading the league in fighting majors with 71. The 2007 Stanley Cup had below-average television ratings and the United States rankings on NBC were down 20% from the previous year's series. On the other hand, the 2008 Stanley Cup drew one of the highest Stanley Cup ratings ever. The Detroit Redwings and Pittsburgh Penguins combined for only 72 fighting majors during the

course of the 2007-08 season, which was one more than the Anaheim Ducks of 2007.

In the book “ Sport Matters” author and sociology professor Eric Dunning discusses how violence in sports impacts other aspects of society in a negative way. He begins by talking about the violent behavior of the crowd at sporting events and some of the riots that have occurred. An example he gives was during a Monday Night Football game between the New England Patriots and the New York Jets in 1977. Dunning describes that riots broke out during the game due to rowdy and drunk fans and the game was interrupted half a dozen times. Two fans died while another thirty spectators were taken to the hospital; and this riot was not even one of the worse ones. Dunning stated that “ the Foxboro police chief claimed to have seen ‘ even worse’ incidents (171). People may ask then what causes these riots and what makes fans so violent and aggressive? Dunning answers this question by suggesting:

In common with other Western industrial societies, the USA has highly publicized mass spectator sports, some of which, especially baseball, (gridiron) football, and (ice) hockey, have a pronounced macho emphasis. The USA also has a long-established tradition of street gangs, and the dominant norms of masculinity – the ‘ John Wayne’ image – lay stress on fighting and ability to ‘ handle oneself’. (175)

Our society promotes being “ manly” and “ macho” and this has led to an inappropriate aggression by spectators in sports Spectators are supposed to watch and enjoy the game, acting violent and disrupting the game is

certainly uncalled for. Another example of how violence in sports impacts other aspects of society in negative ways is how parents act at their children's sporting events. In the article "Aggression in Sports" author and Psychology professor Daniel L. Wann states that "parents of children involved in sports often behave aggressively in sporting environments" (S32). Violence and aggression comes into play due to the competitive nature of sports and parents wanting to see their child succeed. A parent getting involved in their child's sport is great, but like professional sport spectators, they cross the line when they bring violence into sports.

There have been some instances where violence in sports has not been enough and athletes have turned to illegal actions to supplement their aggression. For example many athletes including household names such as Kobe Bryant and Mike Tyson have been accused of rape. Former pro-football quarterback and current Executive Director of the Sports Leadership Institute Don McPherson discusses the connection between sexual violence and sports:

Early in life most boys hear the insult 'you throw like a girl' or something of this nature. I call it the language of sport as it attacks one's masculinity in an effort to inspire or degrade. The reality is that it teaches and perpetuates sexist and misogynistic attitudes and until it's addressed, sport will continue to be a breeding ground for narrow masculinity and misogyny.

Violence in sports makes masculinity a desired attribute and in some cases, athletes who strive for a sense of masculinity turn to sexual violence. Athletes have also turned to illegal actions other than rape and sexual

violence and have caused fatal damage. An example of this is when former wrestler Chris Benoit murdered his family and then committed suicide. It was a tragic incident and was thought to have occurred because of steroid abuse, but was later found that it was brought on by mental problems due to multiple concussions. In the article “ The Concussion Time Bomb” author Steve Maich describes that “ In rare cases, victims might suffer from post-concussion syndrome in which symptoms refuse to subside, or return with a vengeance when patients physically exert themselves” (50). In Benoit’s case, the concussions he received while wrestling caused him to return with a vengeance toward both himself and his family, resulting in fatal damage.

In the book Sex, Violence, & Power in Sports, American sociologist and author Mike Messner discusses how violence in sports can cause serious long-term damage. Similar to what happened with Chris Benoit, multiple hits and blows in sports can lead to damage that in some cases can not be fixed. Messner explains:

The way athletes are taught to regard their bodies as machines and weapons with which to annihilate opponents often results in their using violence against their own bodies. Partly for this reason, former professional players in the United States have an average life-expectancy of about fifty-six years – roughly fifteen years shorter than the overall average life-expectancy of U. S. males. (95)

American culture and the media still glorify the violence in sports despite the thousands of serious and permanent injuries that occur every year. Athletes are taught to play through pain and though it gives the athlete a masculine

and tough persona, playing through pain can lead to serious damage. An example of this is

Messner states, " Although most wore these injuries with pride, like badges of masculine status, athletes also grudgingly acknowledge that their healthy bodies were a heavy price to pay for glory" (95).