

Aggression and Violence in Sports

Dr. S. R. Agashe

Director of physical education & sports,
S.N.Mor.College.Tumsar

A number of critical questions come to mind as one contemplates the issue of sport aggression. Does participating in or observing violent sporting events serve as a catharsis, or release from aggressive tendencies? Conversely, do these events merely teach and encourage further aggression on and off the playing field? Is it possible to eliminate aggression and violence from sports? If so, how?

In the following two lectures we will be discussing aggression and violence in sport. Topics to be addressed include:

1. Defining aggression
2. Theories of aggression
3. Catharsis hypothesis
4. Measurement issues
5. Fan violence
6. Performance issues
7. Situational factors contributing to aggression
8. Reducing aggression in sport

Defining Aggression

Two factors must be presented in order for a behavior to be labeled aggression. First, the behavior must be aimed at another human being with the goal of inflicting physical harm. Second, there must be a reasonable expectation that the attempt to inflict bodily harm will be successful. Consequently, the following behaviors are not really examples of aggression

1. Doing destructive violence to an inanimate object such as a door or a water cooler.
2. Unintentionally injuring another person during athletic competition.
3. Aggressive behavior in which there is no chance for the intended victim to be injured (e.g., aggressor and victim are separated by bars or by teammates) Over the years, two basic kinds of aggression have been

identified. The first is hostile aggression. For individuals engaged in hostile aggression, the primary goal is the injury of another human being. The intent is to make the victim suffer, and the reinforcement is the pain and suffering that is caused. This sort of aggression is always accompanied by anger on the part of the aggressor. A good example of hostile aggression occurs when a cricket bowler throws a full-toss at the batsman who has angered him

The second major kind of aggression is instrumental aggression. For individuals engaged in instrumental aggression, the intent to harm another individual is present, but the goal is to realize some external goal such as money, victory or prestige. The aggressor views the aggressive act as instrumental in obtaining the primary goal. A parallel cricket example for instrumental aggression would be on in which the bowler has been "ordered" by his coach to hit a batsman in retaliation for some earlier infraction. The bowler is not necessarily angry at the batsman, but sees hitting the batsman as instrumental in achieving the team goal of winning the game.

It must be emphasized that neither type of aggression is acceptable. The aggressor is guilty of purposely inflicting harm with the intent to injure another person. This must be discouraged at all levels of competition, especially the professional level, because young athletes everywhere emulate the pros.

A third category of behavior that is often confused with aggression is assertiveness, or assertive behavior. Generally, when coaches encourage their athletes to be more aggressive, what they really want is that they be more assertive.

Coaches want their athletes to assert themselves and make their presence felt.

Assertiveness involves the use of legitimate physical or verbal force to achieve one's purpose. However, there is no intent to harm the opponent. Even if the opponent is harmed as a result of a tackle in soccer, it is not necessarily aggression. It is merely assertive play, as long as it is within the spirit of the agreed-on rules and the intent to harm is not present. Assertiveness requires the expenditure of unusual effort and energy, but if there is no intent to harm, then any resultant harm is incidental to the game

Theories of Aggression

Theories of aggression fall into four main categories:

1. Instinct theory,
2. Social learning theory
3. Theory of moral reasoning,
4. The frustration-aggression hypothesis

Instinct Theory

Instinct theory is based upon the writings of Sigmund Freud and ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz, Freud (1950) viewed aggression as an inborn drive similar to hunger, thirst, and sexual desire. According to Freud, aggression is unavoidable since it is innate, but as with any drive it can be regulated through discharge, or fulfillment. Since humankind is innately aggressive, it benefits society to promote athletic sports and games that provide a socially acceptable outlet for aggression.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory posits that aggression is a function of learning and that biological drive and frustration are inadequate explanations of the phenomenon. Acts of aggression serve only to lay the foundation for more aggression, and do not result in reduction or purging of the drive to be aggressive. Perhaps the leading advocate of social learning theory, relative to aggression, is Bandura (1973). Bandura proposes that aggression has a circular effect, i.e., one act of aggression leads to further aggression. This pattern

will continue until the circle is broken by some type of positive or negative reinforcement

Theory of Moral Reasoning and Aggression

Theory of moral reasoning proposes that an individual's willingness to engage in aggression is related to her stage of moral reasoning. Since human aggression is viewed as unethical, this theory suggests that a relationship should exist between the level of moral reasoning and overt acts of athletic aggression

Reformulated Frustration-Aggression Theory

As originally presented by Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mower, and Sears (1939), frustration-aggression theory proposes that aggression is a natural response to frustration, and that the aggressive act provides a catharsis, or purging, of the anger associated with the frustration. Frustrations caused by events that are believed to be arbitrary or illegitimate are particularly galling to athletes

The Catharsis Effect

The catharsis effect represents a release of pent-up frustration that makes one feel better. It is a purging of the anger and frustration associated with not being able to accomplish a goal. Venting frustration upon a punching bag or some other inanimate object may serve as a useful catharsis. Venting frustration upon another human being, however, is unacceptable behavior that is likely to lead to more aggression

Aggression is not cathartic in the sense that it leads to a reduction in the desire to aggress. Aggression leads to an increase in aggression as tempers flare and as the behavior becomes learned

Measurement of Aggression

A number of inventories have been developed to measure aggressiveness as a personality disposition or trait. Two of these inventories are the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) and the Aggression Inventory (Gladue, 1991). Sport-specific inventories include the Athletic Aggression Inventory (Bredemeier, 1978) and the Continuum of Injurious Acts (Bredemeier, 1985). The actual measurement of

aggression, however, is much more difficult. Because aggression is defined as the intent to harm another human being, the measurement device must be able to capture this intent.

Fan Violence

Some of the worst examples of sports aggression and violence occur among the fans watching an athletic contest. Every sports event is attended by individuals who may instigate fan violence. These are individuals who score high in the personality disposition of anger and physical aggression. These individuals are attracted to violence and fighting among fans, and exhibit a false belief about the willingness of other fans to join in acts of violence.

Effects of Aggression On Performance

Conventional wisdom argues that acts of aggression on the part of an athlete will constitute a distraction and result in a decrement in performance. Not only are aggressive acts on the part of an individual distracting to the individual, but they are likely to be distracting to the team as a whole. Research shows, for example, that the lower a team is in the standings, the more likely it will be to engage in aggression

Situational Factors in a Sport Setting

Factors associated with the occurrence of aggression in sport-specific situations are as follows

a. Environmental temperature

Archival data suggest that higher temperatures lead major league pitchers to become more aggressive in pitching to batters.

b. Perception of victim's intent

If athletes perceive that an opponent's intent is to inflict harm, they are more likely to respond with aggression against the opponent. This means that perception of an opponent's aggressive intentions may be more salient than such things as defeat and competition.

c. Fear of retaliation

To some degree, the fear of retaliation on the part of the individual who is the target of aggression can inhibit another player from initiating that aggression. A basketball player is a

little less likely to elbow her opponent in the ribs if she fears similar treatment from the opponent

d. Structure of the game

Studies have shown that more aggressive penalties occur as the game score differential increases. When teams are tied or the scores are close, aggression is at a minimum. Research has also shown that the lower the team is in standings, the more its members engage in aggression.

e. Rivalry, familiarity, and frequency of play.

As players become more familiar with one another due to frequency of play, and as the rivalries become more intense due to geographical location, aggression becomes more frequent

f. Goal orientation

A respect for rules and officials declines as the ego orientation of the athlete increases. Conversely, high task goal orientation is associated with higher level of sportpersonship

Reducing Aggression in Sport

Aggression in sport can be curtailed, or at least minimized, if all concerned are interested in doing so. The sad part is that some of the most influential people actually promote rather than discourage violence because they believe it sells tickets.

Research shows that angry feelings and angry behavior, the precursor to hostile aggression can be modified through anger awareness training and role playing. Athletes can learn to control their feelings of hostility anger. Role playing is particularly effective in reducing an athlete's anger feelings and behavior

Curtailing Aggression and Violence by Athletes

- a. Young athletes must be provided with models of nonaggressive but effective assertive behavior.
- b. Athletes who engage in aggressive acts must be severely penalized.
- c. The penalty or punishment that an athlete receives for an act of aggression must be of greater punitive value than the potential reinforcement received for committing the act.
- d. In addition to receiving punishment for acts of aggression, athletes should receive rewards

and praise for showing restraint and patience in emotionally charged situations

Curtailing Aggression and Violence by Fans

- a. Potential troublemakers should be closely supervised. Fans with a history of violence and fighting should be identified and denied admission.
- b. The sale, distribution, and use of alcoholic beverages at sporting event should be limited and controlled.
- c. Athletic events should be promoted and encouraged as family affairs.
- d. The media can promote responsible behavior on the part of the fans by not glamorizing acts of aggression.
- e. As with athletes and coaches, fan aggression must be swiftly and severely punished

References

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