Physical Education and Sports

Grade 12

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Ethical Issues in Sports

To understand the role ethics plays in sport and competition, it is important to make a distinction between gamesmanship and sportsmanship.

Gamesmanship is built on the principle that winning is everything. Athletes and coaches are encouraged to bend the rules wherever possible in order to gain a competitive advantage over an opponent, and to pay less attention to the safety and welfare of the competition. Some of the key tenants of gamesmanship are:

* Winning is everything
* It's only cheating if you get caught
* It is the referee's job to catch wrongdoing, and the athletes and coaches have no inherent responsibility to follow the rules
* The ends always justify the means

Some examples of gamesmanship are:

* Faking a foul or injury
* Attempting to get a head start in a race
* Tampering with equipment, such as corking a baseball bat in order to hit the ball farther
* Covert personal fouls, such as grabbing a player underwater during a water polo match
* Inflicting pain on an opponent with the intention of knocking him or her out of the game, like the Saint's bounty scandal
* The use of performance-enhancing drugs
* Taunting or intimidating an opponent
* A coach lying about an athlete's grades in order to keep him or her eligible to play

All of these examples place greater emphasis on the outcome of the game than on the manner in which it is played.

A more ethical approach to athletics is sportsmanship. Under a sportsmanship model, healthy competition is seen as a means of cultivating personal honor, virtue, and character. It contributes to a community of respect and trust between competitors and in society. The goal in sportsmanship is not simply to win, but to pursue victory with honor by giving one's best effort.

Ethics in sport requires four key virtues: fairness, integrity, responsibility, and respect.

Fairness

* All athletes and coaches must follow established rules and guidelines of their respective sport.
* Teams that seek an unfair competitive advantage over their opponent create an uneven playing field which violates the integrity of the sport.
* Athletes and coaches are not discriminated against or excluded from participating in a sport based on their race, gender, or sexual orientation.
* Referees must apply the rules equally to both teams and cannot show bias or personal interest in the outcome.

Integrity

* Similar to fairness, in that any athlete who seeks to gain an advantage over his or her opponent by means of a skill that the game itself was not designed to test demonstrates a lack of personal integrity and violates the integrity of the game. For example, when a player fakes being injured or fouled in soccer, he or she is not acting in a sportsmanlike manner because the game of soccer is not designed to measure an athlete's ability to flop. Faking is a way of intentionally deceiving an official into making a bad call, which only hurts the credibility of the officiating and ultimately undermines the integrity of the game.

Responsibility

* To be sportsmanlike requires players and coaches to take responsibility for their performance, as well as their actions on the field. This includes their emotions.
* Many times athletes and coaches will make excuses as to why they lost the game. The most popular excuse is to blame the officiating. The honorable thing to do instead is to focus only on the aspects of the game that you can control, i.e. your performance, and to question yourself about where you could have done better.
* Responsibility requires that players and coaches be up to date on the rules and regulations governing their sport.
* Responsibility demands that players and coaches conduct themselves in an honorable way off the field, as well as on it.

Respect

* All athletes should show respect for teammates, opponents, coaches, and officials.
* All coaches should show respect for their players, opponents, and officials.
* All fans, especially parents, should show respect for other fans, as well as both teams and officials.

The sportsmanship model is built on the idea that sport both demonstrates and encourages character development, which then influences the moral character of the broader community. How we each compete in sports can have an effect on our personal moral and ethical behavior outside of the competition.

Some argue for a "bracketed morality" within sports. This approach holds that sport and competition are set apart from real life, and occupy a realm where ethics and moral codes do not apply. Instead, some argue, sports serves as an outlet for our primal aggression and a selfish need for recognition and respect gained through the conquering of an opponent. In this view, aggression and victory are the only virtues. For example, a football player may be described as mean and nasty on the field, but kind and gentle in everyday life. His violent disposition on the field is not wrong because when he is playing the game he is part of an amoral reality that is dictated only by the principle of winning.

An ethical approach to sport rejects this bracketed morality and honors the game and one's opponent through tough but fair play. This means understanding the rules and their importance in encouraging respect for your opponent, which pushes you to be your best.