

## AGGRESSION IN SPORT\*

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### **Abstract**

*Aggression in sport – considering the issue from the viewpoint of regulations of particular sports – may be necessary (that is, instrumental) or non-instrumental (that is, potential in that sense that it enables expression of emotions which are not provided by regulations. It is necessary when aggressive behaviours result from regulations of a given sport. It refers, among others, to such combat sports like boxing, judo or wrestling. Competitors who avoid fighting and who do not manifest aggressive behaviours in that field are induced to manifest them and – if it does not bring results – are punished by referees and, as a last resort, sent off.*

**Key words:** aggression, behaviour, sport

### **1. Postulation of Science on Aggression in Sport**

There is extensive literature on aggression in sport – especially in English, but also in Polish, although considerably smaller. It constitutes sufficient grounds for initial considerations concerning the postulation of establishment of a new science called the science on aggression in sport, which could constitute one of many components of sciences on aggression.

Aggressive behaviours and attitudes are investigated first of all from the viewpoint of psychology, sociology and philosophy. Erich Fromm's considerations entitled *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* are fundamental in that field. He pointed out three disciplines could constitute grounds for the establishment of a coherent foundation for the abovementioned science on aggression – and especially on aggression in sport.

That postulation refers to a similar idea which was put forward by Maria Ossowska in the field of researches on ethics. It is included in her work *Podstawy nauki o moralności* (*Foundations of Science on Morality*, 1996), where she proposed the establishment of a new cognitive discipline called science on morality. She founded it just on philosophical, sociological and psychological assumptions. That new discipline was to be completely autonomous from the sociology of morality, the psychology of morality and the philosophy of morality (understood also as one of branches of philosophy called ethics; *nota bene* philosophy of morality in its narrower can be treated as an analogon of metamorality or metaethics).

Considerations on aggression in sport can be led both autonomously – from the viewpoint of one of the abovementioned specialized sciences – and in a more coherent, holistic (that is: integrated) way, since it is known that scientific disciplines are shaped in various ways. Some of them constitute a compound of some group of **issues** which are united by a common **subject**, others gather issues which are researched with a

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common **method**, and others are united both by the **subject** and the **method**. As it is easy to guess, the science on aggression in sport would be a discipline which is united by a bond between some group of issues and unity of the **subject**, and not by one uniform method, since its issues would have to be considered *e.g.* from the viewpoint of the specialized methodology of proper psychology, sociology and philosophy. It is a situation similar, among others, to solutions applied by Ossowska in the science on morality and analogous to the situation taking place in the science on science and science on language, which – while researching language from its semantic, morphological and phonetic side, has to refer to various methods. It is also similar to the situation in sport sciences or physical culture sciences, which regard various and different issues from the viewpoints of methodologies of many specialized sciences.

In the proposed science on aggression in sport we would have to do with a characteristic and clearly explicated subject of researches and with researches requiring referring to different and various specialized methodologies of the abovementioned basic sciences.

*Nota bene* Ossowska, in spite of the fact that her ideas gained common recognition, has had no continuators in the field of realization of her great ethical project. There were no persons which would be prepared for the proposed task as well as her, since it is difficult to find polyhistorians which would be as excellent as her in the fields of sociology, psychology and philosophy simultaneously. Taking it into account, I have unfavourable predictions for the postulation included in the title and the content of this text. But you never know...

In the process of establishing the foundations of the science on morality, Ossowska founded her efforts first of all on philosophy – on its methodological and content-related assumptions. She used them for organizing issues, aspects, notions and theories coming also from the other scientific disciplines – that is, from the sociology and the psychology of morality. That type of procedure is justified among others because of that reason that all specialized sciences derive its origin in a more or less direct way from ancient philosophy, which – till the times of Aristotle – was the first and all-encompassing science. Sociology and psychology separated themselves from philosophy only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Moral reflection, which had been well developed in the pre-philosophical period – what is testified, among others by Homer's and Hesiod's works – relatively quickly gained a high philosophical status in Pythagorean writings and especially in Socrates' ethical intellectualism. The sociology and the psychology of morality are indubitably manifestations and, simultaneously, much modified and sublimated forms of that intellectualism. Their genetic and content-related connections are obvious. It is the reason why foundations of the science on morality - which aspired, although not very successfully, for autonomy - got, in spite of that, a philosophical foundation and perspective.

In the case of the science on aggression in sport the assumption is similar, although the situation preceding its coming into being looks differently. The point is that both its foundation and the perspective of its development should have a philosophical character, in spite of the fact that in considerations on aggression in sport psychological and sociological researches overwhelm. Sooner or later the task of establishing deepened scientific self-knowledge concerning reflection on aggression in sport will be assigned just to philosophy because of its organizing, synthetic and fulgurational (the term taken from K. Lorenz,) character. It is characteristic for

development of particular sciences after their establishment that that deepened reflection appears and it is divided into two stages. Its first, content-related and formal, stage is the theory of a given discipline and the second is its philosophy. Biology, the theory of biology and then the philosophy of biology – which similarly as that theory constitutes an immanent part of a given discipline – may serve as an example.

I am writing about it *inter alia* because of that reason that during an important and fruitful panel on aggression in sport (participated by over a hundred of discussants – one of participants, a professor of psychology, challenged the need of philosophical researches and reflection blending statements on a given form of aggression.

The undermentioned considerations constitute an attempt at gradual development of philosophical – and simultaneously organizing – reflection on aggression in sport taking into account, first of all, achievements of psychology and sociology in that field.

## **2. Aggressive behaviours in sport – interpretations and classifications**

There are two different viewpoints concerning aggression in sport: the cognitive one and the ideological one. The first of them assumes researching sports phenomena such as they are – in an objective way free of any distortions – in order to describe, explain and compare them - to present the real situation as well as the range and contents of discursive reflection which is connected with it as fully as possible and without emotional engagement.

The second standpoint, admittedly saturated with noble intentions, aspires for boosting sport maximally. It treats the discussed issue in an ideological way; that is, it strives for presenting sport as well as behaviours and values which are connected with it in the most favourable light attempting to hide its vices or anti-values. It makes the diagnosis of the existing state of affairs, finding symptoms of the social and individual illness and a related causal and symptomatic treatment as well as neutralisation or repair of drawbacks impossible to a considerable degree.

Attitudes towards aggression in sport, while taking into account other criteria, may be divided into the cognitive interpretation and the commonsense interpretation. The first is mainly connected with psychological, sociological and philosophical researches regarding that issue. On their basis it is pointed out – it refers especially to literature in Polish and English – that there exist two forms of aggression in the field of competitors’ rivalry; namely (shortly speaking) necessary aggression resulting from regulations of a given sport and emotional aggression aimed at doing harm to the opponent.

Proponents of the commonsense viewpoint are of an opinion that aggression has solely negative meaning and (in spite of that what is pointed out in the abovementioned literature) it takes place only in the second form. That commonsense viewpoint is strengthened by J. Gaşowski (1993, pp. 13-19), who - referring to, among others, A. Bandury (1973) – points out that harmfulness and anti-normativity of behaviours should be the only criterion differentiating aggressive behaviours in sport from non-aggressive ones. Then – according to his opinion - it would be possible to avoid many misunderstandings and talking about positive or harmless aggression in sport (Gaşowski, 1993, p. 14). I polemicise against that viewpoint.

There is a view assuming that sport, by providing an outlet for a drive for movement activity, neutralizes the need of aggression in everyday life and facilitates calm behaviours outside of sport (Biernacka 1998, p. 16). However, it is also possible that necessity or possibility of aggressive behaviour in sport stimulates and enhances general aggression, conviction about one's own superiority and the need of demonstrating it (ibid., p. 17).

E. Aronson (1995, p. 314), referring to views of a psychiatrist W. Menninger, states that games based on competition provide an exceptionally satisfying outlet for an instinctual drive for aggression. M.A. Holowczak (2003, pp. 387-399) points out – similarly as J. Perry (2002, pp. 205-224) and F. DeWachter (1987, pp. 17-29) – to an important educational and simultaneously moral function of sport in this respect. Holowczak emphasizes also (2003, p. 389) that sport constitutes a particular compensatory-kathartic mechanism or that it is an example of Lorenz's mechanism – that is, of a hydraulic model which neutralizes aggression (Lorenz, 1966).

L. Berkowitz (1970, pp. 1-7) proclaims, on the other hand, that no research, no empirical data legitimize a conclusion that intensive physical activity diminishes aggression in general (Karolczak-Biernacka 2000, p. 8).

*Nota bene* – as it is pointed out by, among others, D. Smith and S. Stewart (2003, pp. 384-395), D.S. Kemler (1988), B.J. Bredemeier, D.L. Shields, M.R. Weiss and B.A.B. Cooper (1986, pp. 304-318) or J.M. Brown and N. Davies (1978, pp. 61-70) – aggressive behaviour increases especially in the so-called contact sports where there is a direct bodily contact with the rival. In non-contact sports such behaviours are present to a smaller degree. Intensity of aggressive behaviours – both in contact and non-contact sports – is usually considerably bigger when competitions are participated by boys and men than in rivalry of girls and women (Kemler 1988).

Regardless from the fact if sports facilitates weakening motivations for aggressive behaviours outside sport or if it just stimulates them, it is indisputable that those behaviours are present in sport. It refers not only to top, Olympic or professional sport, but also to mass, common, school, amateur sport and to many other forms of sport for all.

The problem of aggression appearing in sport concerns, first of all, the very athletes, who behave towards each other in an aggressive way, and social milieu connected with sport – especially fans.

In my presentation I am going to focus especially on aggressive behaviours in top (Olympic, professional) sport and on fans' behaviours accompanying the sports spectacle. The last question I am going to present only in a sketchy way since the editor has limited the time of presentations. Problems connected with that issue are going to be developed by me on another occasion.

### **3. Regulation-related and regulation-unrelated aggression**

Aggression in sport – regarding that issue from the viewpoint of regulations concerning particular sports – has, on the one hand, regulation-related, necessary, immanent, coherent, instrumental and task-oriented character; on the other hand, it is emotional, oriented at doing harm to the rival – that is, it is not provided by regulations, so it is potential in that sense that it enables expression of emotions which are not connected with rules of competition.

Regulation-related – that is, necessary aggression – is something we have to do with when aggressive behaviours result from regulations of a given sport. It refers to contact sports – among others, to combat sports such as boxing, judo or wrestling. Competitors who avoid fighting and who do not manifest aggressive behaviours in that respect are induced to manifest them and, at a last resort, they are disqualified.

The second form of aggression is non-regulation aggression. It heads for harming the rival. It is unpredictable in that sense that it has reactive, angry and highly spontaneous character. It is present – especially in its reactive variation – to a greater degree in the directly contact sports than in the others (Kemler 1988, Smith and Stewart 2003, pp. 384-395). It is not stimulated by regulations of a given sport, quite the opposite – it is limited and punished by them. An example in this respect may be constituted by the boxing fight for a championship between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield. While during that famous fight the boxers eagerly beat each other with powerful strikes in a way conforming to the rules they manifested regulation-related, instrumental, task-oriented, immanent, coherent and necessary aggression, in spite of the fact that particular elements of technique and tactics of the fight which were applied may not have been necessary. They had aleatoric character – they provided constant and accidental solutions in that respect.

On the other hand, when Tyson bit off a part of Holyfield’s ear we had to do with unpredictable, harmful, condemnable and punishable aggressive behaviour going drastically beyond the definition, rules or regulations of a given sport. Tyson – except of moral restrictions – suffered because of that reason a sanction provided by the administrative code. He was forbidden to participate in (*nota bene*, highly paid) boxing fights in the majority of states of the USA and payment of his honorary, which was a few dozen million dollars high, was withheld.

In the United States, where the second form of athletes’ aggression have become common among others in ice-hockey, the first criminal trial because of a regulation-unrelated act of hooliganism in the sports field took place because of such an act performed in the rink (Ingham R. 1985, pp. 29-33).

Particular expressions which are used with reference to aggressive behaviours of competitors conducting in conformity with rules of rivalry are not sufficient. For example, a phrase “task-related aggression” which is used by B. Karolczak-Biernacka (2000, no. 7-8, p. 6) – referring to J. Reykowski’s views (1975) – may concern aggression resulting from the rules of the game, but it is not necessary, since it may also refer to premeditate regulation-unrelated aggression heading for harming the rival. It may also refer to aggression which is not manifested by athletes – for example, to hooligan fans’ behaviours based on a prepared scenario determining aims and tasks connected with verbal and physical aggression towards rival athletes, their fans, persons dealing with keeping order and accidental persons both in the place of sports rivalry (for example, in the field or in the rink) and outside of it.

On the other hand, the notion of instrumental aggression, used by, among others, Smith and Stewart (2003, pp. 384-395) as well as by Kemler (1988), has reductionist properties. It points out to instrumental – in that case, one-sided and not overall (that is, exhaustive) treatment of rules of a given sport which order athletes to behave aggressively or encourage them to do it as a manifestation of rivalry which is necessary for or leads to a possible success. Also in that case – similarly as in the case of the abovementioned task-related aggression – aggression may have regulation-unrelated and non-sport character.

The term “regulation-related aggression” points out both to the subject and place of aggressive behaviours as well as to their task and forms and instruments (means) which are necessary for realization of the aim which is pointed out in rules of rivalry and connected with a given sport. That aggression, directed only at opponents in sports rivalry, results from overall and exhaustive characteristics of a given sport. It is one of the reasons why it is coherent, since it is immanently blended into a given sport, inseparably connected with it and, because of that fact, necessary. It would be impossible for a given sport and for rivalry which belongs to it to come into existence without that aggression.

In spite of the fact that the name “regulation-related aggression” seems the most proper to describe the first of the discussed forms of aggression, a relatively full description of it will be obtained by us if add to that notion next terms of supplementary character, such as necessary aggression, task-related aggression, immanent aggression, coherent aggression or instrumental aggression.

Fans’ aggressive behaviours, both before and during the sports spectacle and outside of it, will never be necessary in that respect, since rules, assumptions or regulations of a given sport concern competitors’ and not fans’ conduct. Because of that reason, fans’ aggression has potential and emotional character. It may be planned or spontaneous. It may also have instrumental and task-related character, but it will never be necessary, coherent and immanent, since it is not imposed by rules of a given sport. Both fans manifesting harmful aggression and fans cheering or watching a match in a quiet way are – or at least sometimes are – interested in a given sport, but they are not subject to its regulations except of those which define the place of fans’ stay during the sports spectacle.

Regulation-related (necessary, instrumental, task-related, immanent, coherent) aggression is protected and – colloquially speaking – taken care of by legal norms, moral values and customs, such as it takes place in combat sports or team games.

The perpetrator of an opponent’s death during sports rivalry, the rival who has contributed to a permanent disability or injury suffers sanctions neither from the viewpoint of the administrative code, nor from the viewpoint of the criminal code if he abides regulations of a given sport.

Thus for example in the case of a boxer who – abiding rules of fight connected with regulation-related (necessary, etc.) aggression has killed or permanently or temporarily damaged his opponent – it is impossible to apply such an article or paragraph of administrative proceedings which would forbid him practicing boxing in the future. It is also impossible to apply in his case any norm of the criminal code which would cause initiating legal proceedings in the field of the criminal law. Neither such a person is socially condemned.

Legal, ethical and customs-related sanctions may be applied in the case of aggressive behaviours of athletes and other persons formally connected or not connected with sport (like, for example, fans) whose conduct has no features of regulation-related (necessary, etc) aggression.

The abovementioned second form of aggression, which is connected with regulation-unrelated activities of emotional basis, is characterized by the fact that its main aim is harming the opponent – that is, causing such a discomfort, such a negative physiological, mental and relational stress (in the case of the last adjective I mean for example social bonds which are present in the team) which is not provided by rules of rivalry. It is unpredictable in that sense that it has regulation-unrelated, reactive, angry,

hostile and highly spontaneous character. It is not stimulated by rules of a given sport, quite the opposite – it is limited and punished by them.

Reactive, angry or hostile behaviours appear also during aggressive activities of the first type and by no means they are necessarily negatively evaluated. *E.g.* in combat sports reactive behaviour is something natural. Competitors react aggressively among others for the opponent's successful or unsuccessful attack, or when they notice some deficiency in his training, bad tactical and technical solutions (like gaps in defence) or symptoms of increasing fatigue.

It also possible to enter a competition being hostile towards the opponent. Hostility or anger may be also arisen by the opponent's behaviour. They are a manifestation of activity of emotional character. They may be oriented – similarly as in the case of the second type of aggression – at harming the opponent, making him weaker or at his complete elimination from the fight. In boxing it is caused by painful blows delivered in the head, the jaw, the liver, the so-called solar plexus; their aim is knocking the opponent down and a spectacular knock-out. Motivation is in that case a minor affair. That what counts is first of all regulation-related or regulation-unrelated character of aggressive behaviour. Excessive anger or hostility towards the opponent, if they do not undermine the rules of rivalry, may be negatively evaluated by a part of the spectators only in a professional or a moral sense.

All manifestations of reactive, angry, hostile, emotional aggression may constitute objectivization of highly spontaneous and simultaneously unpredictable behaviour. The pointed out manifestations of behaviour appearing during aggression of the first type are however – in contrast to its second form – proper and permissible, since they are taken into account or even stimulated by regulations of competitions. In that sense, they are manifestations of aggression of regulation-related character. On the other hand, when the discussed activities go beyond the rules of rivalry, they have regulation-unrelated character; that is, they are reprehensible. I will emphasise it once more – motivation for aggression is a matter of minor importance. That what counts are forms of its objectivization and their conformity (or disconformity) with the rules.

According to A. Fařara and B. Karolczak-Biernacka (2000, no. 7-8, p. 6) aggression in sport still increases. They are of an opinion that one of reasons of that phenomenon is a tendency for increasing attractiveness of sports spectacles. It is obtained through creating rigorous conditions of taking part in competitions and playing games, including regulations forcing to make quick, aggressive attacks, to fight fiercely.

That statement is right, although I cannot find there a clear statement whether it is a positive or a negative phenomenon. I have the impression – may be a mistaken one – that the abovementioned psychologists rather deplore that progressive situation. I have a rather ambivalent opinion in that respect. I positively evaluate that interest in sport as a form of the spectacle is more and more quickly growing, that regulations facilitating increasing attractiveness of the sports spectacle are made more precise and improved, since it stimulates coaches and competitors for improving their qualifications and abilities, their technical and tactical qualifications. It motivates them for greater activity before and during rivalry, for regulation-related (necessary, etc) aggressive behaviours with a greater and greater dose of emotions. That type of aggression is by all means desirable.

Mental stress, social, club, financial or political pressure which are connected with it more and more often stimulate and motivate for regulation-unrelated aggression, which is reprehensible and harms opponents constituting a testimony to aspiring for

victory at any price, undermining the fair play principle and other values of sport with the human being as the most important of them, since it is just for him – for fulfilment of his dreams, expectations and needs – sport has been created (Kosiewicz 2005, pp. 316-325).

Regulation-unrelated aggression has not sport character in spite of the fact that it is present in the sports spectacle, since it is directed against rules of a given sport. Thus, it is directed against a given sports activity, which is more or less defined by its entanglement just in those principles and rules determining its essence, identity, character, properties and principles of rivalry. It comes also out against specific and permissible forms of movement which are connected with that definition and characteristic for a given sport.

Taking into account the abovementioned statements, it is permissible to proclaim that in the sports spectacle we find aggression facilitating increasing the audience and development of that form of activity; that is, sports aggression, positive and regulation-related aggression. There are also opposite behaviours – that is, non-sport, negative, regulation-unrelated aggression, which should not appear in sport. From that viewpoint, it does not belong to the realm of sport. The development of the first is advisable, while the second should be limited as much as possible. However, its complete elimination - according to my opinion - will never be possible.

The abovementioned distinction between positive aggression and negative aggression derives, in an inspirative sense, from Erich Fromm who, while writing in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973, p. 25) about aggression as such from the psychological and philosophical point of view, proclaims that defensive “harmless” aggression serves survival of the individual and it stops when the danger ceases to exist. “Harmful” aggression – that is, cruelty and destructiveness - is characteristic for human beings and it does not exist in the case of the majority of mammals.

That distinction, transferred into the field of sport, points out that harmless aggression is aggression resulting from the necessity to conform to regulations of a given sport. Harmful aggression, on the other hand, comes out against its principles, undermines its identity in order to harm the rival as much as possible. It manifests itself in a regulation-unrelated way. It is activity increasing and supporting sports destructiveness with help of illegal additional means which do not belong to the accepted training, competition-related, educational and moral canon of a given sport. That type of aggression surprises, is a source of discomfort and reluctance towards such a form of rivalry. In that sense it is aggression – and simultaneously destructiveness – of anti-humanist and anti-humanitarian character.

The pointed out regulation-unrelated (non-sport, anti-humanist, anti-humanitarian, harmful, negative, destructive, emotional) aggressive behaviours of athletes may derive, among others, from the following individual and social reasons: a) from inability for suppressing negative emotional aggression, b) from ignorance of a proper compensating mechanism or from inability for applying it; c) from a will to harm the opponent in a regulation-unrelated way resulting from frustration, from helplessness in the face of the rival’s skills, of the level of technical, tactical and endurance-related training of the opponent; d) from the atmosphere which is unfavourable for the rival or opponents and which is created by the favoured athletes’ closer or further circle in connection with the approaching sports spectacle. It refers to teammates, coaches, workers of the club, sponsors as well as to press, radio and TV reporters, politicians and

other persons arising reluctance towards the rival or opponents in a more or less open way.

The pointed out reasons and possible manifestations of aggression may be also divided into the following types of behaviour: a) spontaneous behaviours – resulting from unconscious or undefined individual (immanent) and environmental (transcendental) reasons, b) purposeful behaviours – resulting from the earlier accepted plan (scenario, score) of the game. Both assumptions and their objectivization are a testimony to negation of the existing social (sports, educational, moral, administrative) norms.

The first form of behaviours – if it manifests itself too often – may be neutralised, treated or eliminated as a result of professional and consequent educational and training activities as well as psychological or psychiatric therapy. It may be also excluded, if it is too irritating, bothersome and harmful, with help of selection – disqualifying a given athlete from rivalry, training and sport.

The second one – its coming into existence – is to the greatest degree influenced by coaches, who may, as a result of their own beliefs or under the pressure of their patrons and the milieu which is connected with sport, diminish its influence or eliminate it completely.

Both forms of aggressive behaviours – when they are too harmful - are subject to judgment from the viewpoint of the administrative code and the criminal code.

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