EFFECT OF SPORT AGGRESSION ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL REALM OF ATHLETES

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Abstract

Background: Sport aggression is a common phenomenon visible among athletes on the field of play. At times, such behaviour is expected of an athlete. Peak performance is claimed to be a resultant product of approaching a player or a sport with a certain amount of aggression. The objective of the research paper is to determine if aggression attributed to participation in sport has its ramifications beyond the field of play for an athlete. Methods: The research was conducted using a self-administered survey of close-ended questions distributed among the general population. Results: The results of this research postulate that aggression is present in professional as well as recreational realms of play and is in fact acquired rather than innately possessed. The results depict a trend of aggressive outbursts within the field of play. However, such outbursts or effects of accumulated aggression are limited to the field of play and do not find themselves manifested beyond that. Conclusion: In summation, sports and aggression are inseparable and instances of violent outburst are visible among athletes beyond the pitch. However, the frequency of such occurrences is negligible when compared to the general population.

Keywords: Behavioural Psychology, Sport Aggression, Sport Psychology

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1. Introduction:

Sports is considered to be an overall language that can be interpreted by people worldwide. Sports can be used as a medium or a tool to spread a certain emotion or a message to a large audience without even focusing on the message altogether. This implies that sport has a certain amount of an emotional connect that can be witnessed when it is being played or watched by an individual or a group of individuals. Hence, sportsmen and sportswomen have a certain mentality that needs to be maintained in order for them to perform their sport at the highest levels. Hence, management of this mentality is of utmost importance.

There are instances where once can observe an elite individual to be ‘off his/her game’ even though his or her recent form or track record is untouchable. This is where a sportspersons mindset is considered to be not at optimal levels. Hence, one can observe that if any sportsperson goes through a separation or the loss of a close family member, that sportsperson is usually not allowed to perform, given his/her mental condition.

However, this only speaks about the psychology of a player on the pitch in a manner that he/she is supposed to maintain. However, there is a good chance that these attitudes may trickle down into the personal and public lives of a sportsperson, which may not be the best for him/her. The simple assumption is that male-dominated sports breed an attitude of homophobia and the baseless criticism of women. This is may not be breaking news for any individual who has spent time in an adolescent male locker room. What information holds value, however, is the authors connecting the dots of locker-room mentality with data.
indicating that on certain college campuses, one third of all reported rapes involve male athletes, who represent less than a third of all males on campus (1).

The above statement represents the very fact of an alpha male complex appearing in sportsmen that links reckless crass behaviour with elite ruthless performance on-field. Gelfand and Hartman discovered that participation in simple activities raised boys' and girls' levels of aggression, regardless of the final result of the activity (2). This certainly goes on to imply that the need of the hour is to manage the psychology of a sportsperson beyond the realms of his or her sporting arena. With the above citation being made towards a game including just boys and girls playing a competitive game with almost no recognition or standard, one can only imagine the aggression being generated at higher levels of competition played by elite athletes with a mindset much stronger.

The frustration-aggression hypothesis has been put forth to explain human aggressive behaviours, maintaining that aggression is caused by frustration (3). It is a general perception that frustration caused due to goals not being achieved is the primary cause of aggression. Usually for a sedentary individual, such an occurrence is rare; however, for a sportsperson, his/her life depends of winning and losing almost every day. This could refer to winning or losing a point, to winning or losing a game altogether or to failing at breaking own personal goals or records. This implies that there is a decent amount of passive aggression that tends to build up in an individual over time that just waits for the moment to burst into active aggression, if not properly handled.

Alland conducted a certain study on the Pacific people, the Samai of Malaysia. He came upon the fact that the Samai did not express any aggressive behaviour when a role model of aggression was absent. This led Alland to conclude that aggression is not instinctive. This goes to show that any human being does not possess any aggressive traits but eventually builds them up looking at other individuals or models of aggression (4). This also points to the fact that sportsmanship or commitment could be confused with aggressive behaviour.

Some argue that athletes tend to be more unsportsmanlike than their non-athlete counterparts, and that a long period of involvement and high degree of physical contact in sports impacts negatively on participants' moral reasoning (5).

Belier and Stol discovered that high school non-athletes scored significantly higher in terms of moral reasoning than did high school athletes (6). This goes to show that a sedentary lifestyle that does not pep adrenaline levels does not induce aggression.

However, Treasure put forth the point that participating in sports with the negative form of training could have a devastating lifelong impact on a child's sociomoral development (7). This depicts the very fact that a coach is no longer a mentor on the pitch, but off the pitch as well. Usually coaches with overly exertive principles of winning without concern of ethics tends to wear off on players. Such kind of attitudes need not only come from coaches but from fellow players and fans as well. Certain instances include that of David Beckham being hit in the face by a flying boot by Sir Alex Ferguson, or Roy Keane knocking out his fellow teammate Gabriel Heinze in the dressing room for not being aggressive enough. As for the fans, any derby matches of any sport mean that more than a sport and a stadium, it is a war and a battleground. This again, goes on to have a lasting impression on the personal mindset of players. Guivernau and Duda and Stephens found players interpreted a team's pro-aggressive principles were the best predicator of the players' likelihood to aggress (8).

Economists, however, work on the assumption that economic agents are interested in their own concerns and, therefore, their behaviour can be explained principally by economic factors (9). For instance, in a sport like Ice Hockey, brawls and fights within the game form an integral part of the culture of the sport. Majority of the views garnered come in due to the ruthlessness associated with the sport.

All in all, one can conclude that aggression and sports do go hand in hand. At times, such aggression manifest itself in the personal and public life of an individual which has been analysed.
The issue that this paper looks to address is whether cumulative aggression obtained while pursuance of a sport can have an effect on the personal and social life of an athlete or an individual.

The motive behind this area of research is to determine the psychological effect of indulging in sport-related aggression in an athlete’s life off the pitch. The objective of the research is to attain a certain perspective of how on field conduct or state of emotions affect an athlete once the game has been completed. The significance of the study is to ensure that aggression, which is very similar to passion for sports and performance, doesn’t not end up affecting the personal and social lives of a sportsperson. Instances of aggression among prominent sportspersons only acts as a catalyst for the common public or fans viewing such sports to act in the same manner as their role models, which is detrimental to the apt functioning of society.

Kerr, John authored a book that mentions and ascertains the fact as to how aggression is normalized in the field of sport and at times even misinterpreted as motivation [10]. The author focuses on the reversal theory in sports that links outcomes of certain scenarios to that of behaviour. Here, four domains are focused upon, two being the absolute opposite of each other. Furthermore, the author focuses on certain theories that acclimatize players to violence or aggression. The literature indicates towards a sense of aggression being essential for performance exhibition by the athlete. Hence, tendencies for an athlete to use the same principle for peak performance in other aspects of his or her life are further increased.

The paper also focuses on the fact that this phenomenon does not affect only the athlete indulging in such behaviour. They postulated that such behaviour can either be acclimatized by genetics, upbringing, culture or imitation. This point towards an indirect effect of being born into such an environment, being raised in such an environment, socially existing in such an environment or simply behaving the same way opinion leaders behave, an act of miming or imitation. There are solutions as well to reduce aggression, but this research information pertains only to on field behaviour rather than taking into consideration both realms.

Rutten, Esther with their research document indicates the various factors that affect the aggression levels of players at adolescent levels. This could either be the team environment, the team principles and attitudes, the relationship of players with the coach, the fair play attitude of the team and the sociomoral climate associated with the team [11]. The research depicted a rather meagre connection between on-field and off-field antisocial and prosocial behaviour which again can be connected to the various factors mentioned above.

Liam emphasized on the main goal of their research article, which was to identify and classify what can be termed as aggressive behaviour and what is not. Hence, behaviours falling under this banner are classified into two categories: Hostile Aggression and Instrumental Aggression, depending on how the outburst occurs. Hostile aggression deals with aggression used to inflict pain or damage towards another human being [12]. The Zinedine Zidane headbutting Materazzi at the World Cup final 2006 can be termed as an incident of Hostile Aggression.

Hostile aggression can be classified as those types of behaviours whose primary goal is to cause harm with or without an intent of self-gratification. Such behaviours are usually an exhibition of dominance by the aggressor over the aggresssee. Instrumental Aggression refers with the release of aggression to achieve a certain objective. UFC players exhibiting aggression to attain fame or financially positive outcomes. Instrumental aggression does have intent or motive that fuels the perpetrator of the act. The main goal is to attain a certain objective, or rather for personal gain of the aggressor.

However, the research paper does not further classify the intent or motivation behind an aggressive act as a positive or negative motivation.

Sønderlund in his study, emphasized on the fact that aggression is not a sudden outburst of rage but more of a cumulative release through infliction of pain. The very fact that cumulation of rage is said to occur, the requirement of a certain stimulus to initiate an act of aggression. This is explained in this research document that associates alcohol abuse to that of sports team members. Alcohol is considered to be the stimulus for aggressive behaviour manifesting itself. The study depicts that the sports involving team participation asks or rather requires of individuals to frequent pubs and bars as means of socializing with their team mates.

The report also goes to show that aggressive behaviour is clearly visible in higher percentages in athletes that abuse alcohol. Aggression under the influence of alcohol majorly categorizes under domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual violations and verbal and mental abuse.

The main intent of reviewing this literature was to focus on the two major factors associated with sport aggression: the accumulation of aggression and the release of aggression. Violence resorted to off the pitch in an inebriated state of mind can be regarded as a release of accumulated aggression on the pitch. Furthermore, consumption of alcohol is rather considered a necessity for team bonding off the pitch that could increase team chemistry on the pitch. Hence, alcohol or any other substances can be regarded as stimuli for social aggression.

Kavussanu, M & Ntoumanis, through the research paper, links the ego of a sports person to the levels of aggression he or she depicts, especially when it comes to contact sports. When an athlete has an ego disorientation, he or she puts aside any moral dilemmas and takes it upon his or her pride to exceed his opponent, even if it means inflicting physical or mental pain.

2. Material & methods:

To gain knowledge and introspect this problem, the approach adopted is a qualitative method of analysis using a survey of questions distributed among various participants of different streams of sports. The survey was undertaken using a Google form containing a self-administered structured questionnaire which was shared with the general population chosen at random. There were a total of 18 questions included, with a majority close-ended questions having an option of Yes, No or Maybe. Furthermore, the questionnaire was shared among the general population chosen at random and was not particularly targeted towards people who play sports. The idea behind this was to include recreational sports as a factor in this study to assess whether the conditions were consistent across recreational and professional indulgence in sports. A total of 93 responses were recorded. The participants in this survey span across various age groups, from young adults to retired professionals. This is to ensure that the consistency of behavioural patterns is visible throughout the population.

The variables chosen are aggressive behaviour by an individual off the pitch and if such behaviour could be attributed to participation in a sport.

The major limitation of the survey is the lack of an e-sports perspective into aggression. Esports, although non-contact in nature, does hold the same principles, as pressure to perform and rivalries are imminent. Raging and bullying are manifestations of such accumulated aggression that has been previously spoken about.

3. Results and Discussion:

After the survey was conducted using a questionnaire shared by means of a google form, the results depicted a participation of 93 people. The responses of all the participants have been taken into consideration. Of the responses, there is just a single response from an individual who does not participate in any sporting activity.

3.1 Demographic Results:
The age of the respondent’s averages at 34.16, with the youngest respondent being 18 and the oldest respondent being aged 69. 11.95% if the respondents are females, while 88.05 are males. 80.4% of the respondents play sports recreationally while 19.6% are professionals. The survey also contained a question whether the participant indulged in a sport at all. This question ensured that the survey also gained a perspective of how a non-participant or a spectator perceives aggression in sport. In addition, the participants were given a choice to choose the sport they participate in, with an option to choose multiple sports. The participants could mention any other sport which weren’t included among the list featuring common sports. The final question included in the survey asks the participants what do they think motivates a sportsperson to indulge in aggressive behaviour in order to determine whether aggression is hostile or instrumental in nature.

A wide array of sports has been analysed which included: Football, Cricket, Hockey, Volleyball, Tennis, Badminton, Basketball, Swimming, Carrom, Table Tennis and Roller speed skating. While majority of the respondents participated at a school level, there are international athletes who form part of this study as well.

3.2. On-Field Results:

According to the results from the survey, 84.8% of the respondents believed that aggression is essential for an athlete to generate peak performance. 10.9% of the respondents are unsure whether aggressive behaviour is necessary for sporting performance, while 4.3% aren’t of the opinion that aggressive behaviour is essential for sports. To introspect on what excites the mind of the respondents viewing a derby encounter between clubs, teams or athletes, 58.7% of the respondents are of the opinion that skills and aggressive scuffles are the primary reasons for viewing such matches. 5.4% of the respondents however, view the matches only for the altercations involved.

All respondents claimed to have witnessed athletes displaying aggressive behaviour on the pitch. Furthermore, 76.1% of the respondents have encountered a coach or teammate who has demanded aggression in a game in order to be passionate. 40.2% of the respondents admit to have indulged in aggressive behaviour on the pitch, while 32.6% are not sure if their behaviour can be classified as aggressive or not. In addition, 46.7% of the sample have responded positively to demanding aggression from their teammates during a match. 45.7% of the respondents have even made rash decisions on the pitch in a fit of rage, while 27.2% do not consider their actions to be aggressive.

3.3. Off-field Results:

However, even with the statistics pointing towards aggressive behavioural outbursts, 60.9% of the population limit their aggression to the pitch itself, claiming that their behaviour changes once the game has concluded. While majority of the respondents claim to not let accumulated aggression affect their behaviour off the pitch, 32.6% have admitted to making impulsive decisions after indulging in a frustrating game or match. The last statistic point towards the fact that hostile and instrumental aggression are clearly in equilibrium.

From the above stated results, it can be interpreted that aggressive behaviour in sport participation has an active as well as a passive effect on a sportspersons psyche. Active aggression can be termed as that form of aggression which an individual experiences first-hand, either by participating in such behaviour or by being aggressed upon. Passive aggression is wherein an individual witness’s aggressive behaviour either by means of another player indulging in such behaviour, a coach reinforcing such behaviour or they themselves demanding aggressive behaviour while playing a sport. Passive aggression also includes spectating a sport for the aggressive acts being depicted in it.

The results also indicate majority of the respondents to be inclined towards the notion that aggressive behaviour is essential for peak performance. A major percentage of the respondents believe that while spectating a game, while player skills are absolutely essential to garner their attention, players initiating and being involved in aggressive scuffles is essential as well. This trait is visible throughout the age group.
being surveyed, with a spike in numbers at the age among the respondents aged between 20-30.

While all the respondents have witnessed aggressive behaviour pertaining to sport, it should be noted that each and every one of the professional players who form part of the survey pursuing their sport in a professional environment have witnessed and encountered professional coaches who have encouraged or rather demanded an aggressive approach to the game from them\(^{(8)}\). In addition, recreational sports personnel also claim to have been coached into an aggressive attitude of approaching a sport.

The survey results also indicate the fact that majority of the respondents themselves indulge in aggressive behaviour, coupled with rash decisions during the game owing accumulated aggression\(^{(2)}\). However, a vast majority of the respondents claim that their aggression lasts as long as the game does, and their decisions post the game are independent of the game, whatsoever the situations created during the game.

Finally, the survey indicates that aggressive behaviour, though constant in nature, has an equilibrium of motive behind its occurrence\(^{(12)}\).

4. Conclusion:

Aggression in sport is a known phenomenon that is essential for adding a certain essence to the sport. The terminology ‘Derby Games’ was coined with an intent to describe an amalgamation of aggression between clubs or teams with intense rivalries. The very fact that such games attract worldwide attention show that an aggressive approach to a game is indeed desired by spectators.

Along with viewing aggression, indulging in aggression during such games is an innate quality possessed by sportsmen and sportswomen. Furthermore, aggression is not only associated with professional sportsmen and sportswomen, but in fact is visible clearly in recreational participants as well. Through this research, it can be postulated that sport breeds aggression. There are instances of individuals engaging in violence due to such accumulated violence. However, the research paper depicts that such outbursts have been particularly low in number.

Even more so, such outbursts limit themselves to the boundaries of the pitch and do not find themselves manifested beyond that. Hence, the research paper reaffirms the fact that although aggression is an innate quality which is inbred, taught and inculcated in sportspeople at all levels of play through coaches and teammates, athletes do not let such behaviour affect their personal and social lives. Although we may see trickles of such behaviour, it is minimal in nature.

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References:
