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Preserving Sporting Values and Ethics: The relationship between anti-doping and sport values and ethics

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Preserving Sporting Values and Ethics

The fastest way to travel ten kilometers on level ground may be in a car, bus or train. Nevertheless, countless people insist on covering such a distance as fast as they can by running, cycling or skiing. They will do it repeatedly, at great effort, in order to become faster. It would be far easier and quicker simply to hop a tram. Each person who does such things is, in his or her own way, an athlete, whether at an elite professional or Olympic level, community or scholastic level. Athletes may compete through organized teams and leagues, but sport can also be spontaneous and informal, for example an impromptu neighborhood game of football or basketball. Athletes participate in sport not because it is an easy or efficient way to get from one place to another, but to seek the values that sport embodies. Spectators who follow sport enjoy and admire the forms of human excellence that sport displays.

One curious property of sport is its attitude towards invention. Some innovations are welcomed, even celebrated. The “Fosbury Flop” gave high jumpers a new technique that allowed them to leap higher than the old facedown method it supplanted (Dixon, 2001). Novel equipment that protects athletes from injury such as helmets for Alpine skiers and cyclists or running shoes that better absorb impact have become standard. Other inventions, however, are rejected. Golf frequently rules out innovative balls or clubs. Recently, it rejected deep rectangular grooves in certain hitting surfaces because these grooves allowed skilled golfers to generate backspin when hitting out of long grass (the “rough”). This backspin allowed much better control of the ball once it landed causing it to “bite” and halting its forward progress (Thomas, 2009). Given that the point of most inventions is to make things easier for people, or to allow them to do things they could not do prior to the invention, why would golf and other sports ever reject such effective innovations?

The question may seem ludicrous to most people who participate in or follow a sport. Of course, people who understand the sport may say, golf has good reasons to ban equipment if it makes the game *too* easy, just as basketball may refuse to double the size of the hoop, high-jumping may prohibit the use of springs in shoes, and the marathon may exclude people wearing roller blades or rocket backpacks. Every sport sets limits on what athletes in that sport are permitted to do and what technologies they may use.

The rules of a sport are in one sense arbitrary. Why are footballers permitted to use their feet and torsos but not their hands or arms (except, of course, for the goalkeeper)? Why not allow players to use any part of their body to get the ball into the goal? People can and do create alternative sports: handball, as the name implies, explicitly encourages athletes to use their hands in order to score a goal. But handball is a different sport in many ways from football. Some of the skills that make a fine handball player, such as foot-speed and accuracy, are also valued in football; but the ability to kick a ball with great velocity, accuracy and spin is not one of them. What redeems the apparent arbitrariness of the rules of each sport are their intimate, inextricable connections with what that sport values (Murray, 2007). Simply making things easier, like covering ten kilometers in a car or tram, renders those values meaningless.

Values and Ethics in Sport

There is no single, authoritative list of sporting values. UNESCO embraces a broad range of values in its Preamble to the 1978 International Charter of Physical Education and Sport in which it declares that “physical education and sport should seek to promote closer communion between peoples and between individuals, together with disinterested emulation, solidarity and fraternity, mutual respect and understanding, and full respect for the integrity and dignity of human beings”. The more recent International Convention against Doping in Sport (2005) affirms “that sport should play an important role in the protection of health, in moral, cultural and physical education and in promoting international understanding and peace” and expresses concern that “the use of doping by athletes in sport and the consequences thereof for their health, the principle of fair play, the elimination of cheating and the future of sport (...) puts at risk the ethical principles and educational values embodied in the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport of UNESCO and in the Olympic Charter”.

The World Anti-Doping Code offers a helpful list of values, but it does not claim that the list is complete (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2003). The WADA Code affirms the central importance of what it calls “the spirit of sport” and describes it as “the celebration of the human spirit, body and mind”. The Code goes on to list a set of values. The first three items in the list deserve special consideration. They are:

- Ethics, fair play and honesty
- Health
- Excellence in performance.

Values such as ethics, fair play and honesty along with sportsmanship have special relevance to sport, perhaps as particular applications in sport of values with far more general scope. Fair play, therefore, may be seen as the sport-specific application of a commitment to justice and fairness (Pipe and Hebert, 2008). Fair play means more than simply the absence of cheating. It means conducting oneself in accordance with what the sport values, even when the rules do not specifically require it (Loland, 2002). It may take the form of telling an opponent when one notices that the opponent’s equipment has been damaged and may fail resulting in poor performance or even injury. Fair play may also be said to be a *regulative* value within sport. Only in the context of fair play can a worthwhile competition take place in which the values athletes pursue through sport have the possibility of being realized. In debates over anti-doping and the use of performance-enhancing drugs and methods in sport, athletes routinely use the metaphor of a “level playing field” to refer to a sport competition not tilted in favor of those using drugs (Murray, 2003).

Health, the second value mentioned in the WADA Code, is central to sport. UNESCO International Charter Of Physical Education and Sport notes in Article 2.2 that “At the individual level, physical education and sport contribute to the maintenance and improvement of health, provide a wholesome leisure-time occupation and enable man to overcome the drawbacks of modern living. At the community level, they enrich social relations and develop fair play, which is essential not only to sport itself but also to life in society”. There is abundant scientific evidence which shows that people who incorporate exercise, physical activity, and participate in sport are likely to be healthier and live longer. Health, then, is an important value significantly advanced as a consequence of sport participation. However, as some critics of sport note, injuries are common among elite athletes either because of the considerable demands of training or, in certain sports, through the risks encountered during competition (Kayser, Mauron and Miah, 2007). This is not, however, evidence against health being an important value in sport. Sports that entail great physical exertions, bodily contact and speed carry inherent risks. Sport can demonstrate its concern for health as a value by making equipment as safe as possible, such as protective helmets worn in many events, and by crafting rules to reduce risky

actions.

Health, like fair play, is a value threatened by doping. There are disputes over the particular risks posed by specific doping agents. In part these disputes arise over a lack of information about the drugs taken by athletes and the combinations and dosages they use. This limitation is caused by concerns over the ethics of research with human subjects. Research ethics committees are reluctant to endorse controlled studies in which healthy young people are administered supraphysiologic doses of substances for clinically unapproved uses. Nonetheless, the scientific literature provides compelling evidence about the likely consequences of the patterns of drug use found among athletes (Sjöqvist, Garle and Rane, 2008). If anti-doping activities ceased, an escalation and expansion, perhaps even an explosion, of drug use would likely follow with potentially severe consequences for the health of elite athletes as well as those who look to them as models.

The third value in the WADA Code list is “excellence in performance”. The pursuit of excellence takes very different forms in different sports. But this pursuit of excellence, through the dedicated development of each person’s natural talents, is common to all sports. The development of talent itself calls upon and reinforces values important in many spheres of life. Certain sporting values are important and virtuous both within and outside of sport. Courage is one; the willingness to shoulder burdens and take risks in the service of an important goal. Perseverance, the tenacity to continue to work towards a worthwhile end despite frustrations and difficulties is another. So is honor, the commitment to do what is right despite temptations to take an easier path. This category can include commitment to a worthy goal; the willingness to sacrifice in pursuit of a goal; the sense of community and solidarity that can be generated by a shared activity among teammates and between competitors who can appreciate a good match and excellence in performance. The recognition of another’s abilities can also be included.

What emerges from these examples is a clearer appreciation of the relationship between what is valued in sport and the value and meaning of sport. To the extent that sport helps persons develop their capacity for courage and perseverance and their devotion to honor, then sport plays a very important role in the development of persons who will enhance the lives of others and the success of the social, economic and political institutions that earn their loyalty.

Article 7 of the UNESCO Charter on Physical Education and Sport warns against forces that can undermine the values sport is meant to foster: “(...) phenomena such as violence, doping and commercial excesses threaten its moral values, image and prestige, pervert its very nature and change its educative and health promoting function”. It recommends that “A prominent place must be assigned in curricula to educational activities based on the values of sport and the consequences of the interactions between sport, society and culture”. It expresses particular concern for the wellbeing of children and young athletes and declares that “No effort must be spared to highlight the harmful affects of doping, which is both injurious to health and contrary to the sporting ethic, or to protect the physical and mental health of athletes, the virtues of fair play and competition, the integrity of the sporting community and the rights of people participating in it at any level whatsoever”.

The interactions between sport, society and culture have become increasingly complex. The media have long covered the results of sport competitions and the personalities of prominent athletes. More recently, journalists are reporting regularly on other aspects of sports, from economic benefits and labor relations to off-field bad behavior and, not least, doping. How the public in general and young athletes in particular view revelations about doping by their sport heroes is difficult to assess. At the very least, such reporting is sparking conversations around the world about the values and meaning of sport.

Athletes have long known or suspected when their competitors were using drugs to gain a performance edge. This phenomenon was uncovered thirty years ago in a research project on

ethics and sport (see Murray, 1983) that demonstrated the powerful coercive impact such beliefs had on athletes who wished to compete clean, but hated giving up an advantage to a cheating competitor. Those who resisted the temptation to dope did so for many reasons, however, but two stood out: they did not want to risk their health; and they felt that the use of such drugs violated their understanding of what sport is about.

In order to understand sporting values it is necessary to inquire into the distinctive shared social meaning of sport. The earlier discussion of fair play reminds us that while sport is a rule-governed activity, those rules do not in themselves constitute the meaning of sport. There are deeper shared meanings and values at play. A brief look at how the rules of a sport evolve will help elucidate this point.

Rules and Values in Sport

There are two ways to conceive of the relationship between the rules of a sport and the value, meaning, or point of the sport. The first conception, which can be called the *constitutive* view, holds that the rules constitute or establish what matters in the sport. According to this view, the values of the sport are dictated by the rules. There is no further or deeper meaning or point to be discovered (Burke and Roberts, 1997). According to the constitutive view, the rules are fundamentally arbitrary; changing the rules requires only agreement among the participants who have no recourse to any independent, deeper conception of what is meaningful or valuable about their sport. The sole criterion for any rules change is procedural: that the decision satisfies whatever the sport's governance structure specifies as a fair rule-making procedure. If the constitutive view were correct, and the governance body of baseball for example decided that henceforth bats will be square rather than round, or the authorities in charge of the Giro d'Italia decided to allow cyclists to attach motors to their bicycles for climbing the Alps and Apennines, there would be no grounds for arguing against such a change in rules, other than claiming that the procedures were not properly observed. However, most competitors in these sports, and the spectators who understand baseball and cycling, would regard such changes as abominations. But the constitutive view of rules in sport would accept no such criticism as long as the proper procedures were observed.

An alternative conception of sport can be described as the *values-centric* view. In this framework a sport's rules are seen as reflecting a deeper shared understanding about the values, meaning or point of the sport. Proposed changes to the sport's rules can, indeed must, take into consideration efforts to preserve or promote those underlying values. Fair procedures are necessary but not sufficient to justify altering rules; those new rules must be grounded in the sport's values (Murray, 2007). Basketball provides an illustration. Among the values basketball embodies and promotes are swiftness, strength, grace, accuracy, and teamwork. When competitors who were large and athletic enough to position themselves underneath the basket and swat away shots, basketball created a rule against "goal-tending". When large, strong players began to force their way close to the basket and dominate the game, basketball created a zone near the basket and prohibited offensive players from standing in that area for more than three consecutive seconds. The three point shot (a basket made from behind a line drawn a substantial distance from the basket) accomplished two things. It opened up the court and at the same time rewarded excellence in shooting. Understood in this way, basketball's rules changes were in fact efforts to restore and preserve the definitive features of the sport.

A very recent controversy provides a confirmatory example. The governing body for the sport of swimming has decided to ban certain swimsuits. The sport had become concerned that athletes wearing new swimsuit designs that, among other things, make swimmers more buoyant and streamlined were breaking speed records at an astonishing pace. According to a recent report: "The tighter, more buoyant models make a muscled and stocky body as streamlined as a long and lean one. With the body riding high on the water like a racing hull, it changes a swimmer's relationship with the water, influencing everything from how vigorously the swimmer

has to kick to the rhythm of the stroke” (Crouse, 2009). An official of FINA, the international governing body for swimming defended the proposed rules changes with this argument: “Swimming has traditionally been a sport where equipment has been secondary to individual talent and determination. With the swimsuits introduced in 2008, equipment became primary, enabling athletes of lesser ability to compete on equal terms with the best-conditioned, hardest-working athletes in the sport. That is why the mandate for change was clear” (Crouse, 2009).

This example is important in three ways. First, it is a clear instance of values-centric rule making. The rules change was occasioned by the introduction of new equipment that was altering the meaning of the sport. The new buoyant suits meant that swimming was now rewarding athletes who paddled on top of the water rather than those whose refined technique allowed them to slice through the water. Radically new swimsuits were threatening to alter what swimming valued. New rules banning such equipment would help to restore and preserve the meaning of the sport.

Second, the official called upon values not merely particular to swimming, but to sport more generally by objecting to equipment that allowed “athletes of lesser ability” to be successful against “the best-conditioned, hardest-working athletes in the sport”. It is difficult to think of a sport that does not value the dedication that goes into creating a well-conditioned body along with the hard work that allows athletes to perfect their technique and skills. Indeed, it would be an odd sport that did not value such dedication, that rewarded equally -or more- performances by lazy, unconditioned, distracted competitors.

Third, the FINA official explicitly argued that swimming valued “individual talent and determination” over equipment. This is an express acknowledgment that people are differently talented. Not everyone can be a great swimmer, footballer, wrestler, marathon runner, shot-put thrower, cricketer, Nordic skier, or basketball player. Indeed, some of the natural talents that make a person particularly suited for certain sports may be major disadvantages for other sports. The heavily muscled body of a superior shot-putter would be very difficult to drag through the twenty-six plus miles of the marathon. Different sports value different natural talents, just as team sports value different abilities at different positions. Differences in people’s natural talents for different sports are not a reason to lament the injustices that nature has visited upon us; rather they are reasons to celebrate the vast variety among sports, and the equally vast array of differences in the human population. The argument of some anti-doping critics that performance-enhancing drugs ought to be permitted as a way of equalizing or leveling out differences in natural talents fails to understand that the celebration of differences in natural talents is fundamental to sport.

The rules of a sport reward particular combinations of talents, perfected through dedication and hard work (Loland and Murray, 2007). These rules establish what sorts of attributes are permitted to make a difference in the outcome and what differences ought not to affect an athlete’s performance. For example, FINA has declared that body-shaping, buoyant, drag-resistant swimsuits should not allow athletes to swim faster than competitors with superior gifts and work ethics. With similar reasoning, swimming and other sports are well-justified in ruling that performance-enhancing drugs should not be allowed to influence who wins and who loses lest athletes with inferior talent and discipline triumph over their more talented, dedicated competitors through mere pharmacology.

How Does Anti-Doping Preserve and Protect Values in Sport?

Anti-doping contributes to the preservation of ethics and values in sport in multiple ways. First, it helps to “level the playing field” for competitors. This is a very imperfect metaphor, but athletes understand quite well what it means. It does not mean that all competitors possess precisely the same capacities. Some athletes are more talented than others, some train with superior dedication, some benefit from superb coaching. The “level playing field” metaphor

captures two important insights about sport. One insight insists that certain differences among athletes or teams should not be tolerated lest some receive an unfair competitive advantage (the playing field is tilted in their favor). For example, the officials who guide sport competition, referees, umpires and the like, must not give preference to one side over the other. Gross inequities in the quality of equipment can also threaten the fairness of the competition and must be carefully monitored. Anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs provide a competitive advantage to whoever uses them. Biased officials, massive inequalities in equipment, and anabolic steroids should not be allowed to decide the outcome of a competition.

The other insight contained in the “level playing field” concept is that while some factors should be equalized, the field itself for example, other differences ought to count. The abilities and dedication of the competitors should be decisive. The playing field, so to speak, needs to be level so that the factors that should determine the quality of performance, including natural talents and their virtuous perfection, can be displayed and rewarded, not masked or obscured.

A second contribution made by successful anti-doping programmes is to assure that cheating and subterfuge are not rewarded. Athletes who desire to compete without using performance-enhancing drugs can become deeply frustrated when they have reason to believe that their competitors are winning not because of superior talent or hard work, but because they resort to doping. To the extent that values such as honesty, fair play, respect for rules and laws, and respect for other participants, all invoked in the WADA Code, are indeed important to sport, then athletes who dope are dishonoring those values while athletes who uphold these values are penalized.

If health, another value invoked in the WADA Code, is an important value for sport then anti-doping offers yet another important contribution to the preservation of sport values. When otherwise healthy athletes take significant doses of powerful drugs, the net result is likely to be a further risk to health. Effective anti-doping programmes helps to protect health, both the health of the elite athlete subject to doping control and the health of aspiring athletes who may admire and want to emulate the elite competitor.

(One argument advanced by anti-doping opponents is that removing the prohibition against doping would allow for medical supervision of drug-taking as well as increased scientific knowledge of the effects these drugs have on athletes and others (Kayser and Smith, 2008). I will deal with this argument below.)

Another way of seeing how anti-doping preserves and protects the ethics and values of sport is to imagine that the world were different. Two alternative worlds of sport are particularly illuminating: a world in which doping is prohibited but with no genuine effort to enforce such a ban; a second world in which the ban against doping is lifted.

Alternative world #1: Doping is banned, but no anti-doping program is undertaken

The first thing we can be sure of in a world without effective anti-doping is that some athletes will use performance-enhancing drugs despite the rules prohibiting such use. The truth of this proposition has been repeatedly demonstrated in sports from weightlifting to cycling to biathlon, skiing and running. When drugs can mean the difference between winning and finishing in the back of the pack or peloton some athletes will take advantage despite the rules.

In the absence of effective anti-doping programmes, athletes face a choice among three alternatives. They can choose to compete clean, knowing they are at a distinct disadvantage to those who cheat, but hope that their talent and dedication can see them to victory. Connie Carpenter Phinney won the first Olympic women’s cycling road race gold against competitors who were blood doping, including some of her own teammates. Most athletes, however, cannot count on their good fortune or vastly superior talent to prevail. In sports where the difference

between winner and also-ran may be measured in fractions of a second, inch, or pound, and where doping can provide even a one or two percent advantage, the clean athlete is far more likely to lose than to win. For athletes for whom such a fate is intolerable, two choices remain.

They can cease competing at this level. We have no good data on how many athletes choose this option, but surely there are some who love their sport but cannot bear to lose to those who cheat.

Then there is the third option: take the same performance-enhancing drugs your competitors are using so that even if it means cheating, you have a chance to win. When athletes who desire to behave ethically, who seek to honor the values inherent in sport, are regularly frustrated and denied a fair chance to compete, sport is in trouble. Principled athletes should be honored, not denied their fair opportunity. Anti-doping is meant to create a fourth option: to compete clean in the reasonable confidence that your competitors are likewise forgoing doping.

Alternative world #2: Doping is permitted; anti-doping is abandoned

Starting from a variety of premises, some anti-doping critics argue that athletes should be permitted to use performance-enhancing drugs. Libertarian arguments maintain that adult athletes should have the freedom to do whatever they wish with their own bodies (Fost, 1986). Other critics agree with the idea that adults should be permitted to reshape themselves according to their own wishes, but divide on the question whether that freedom should extend to all drugs or only to certain ones (Savulescu, Foddy and Clayton, 2004 ; Kayser and Smith, 2008). This disagreement is an important one to which I will return shortly. For now, consider the scenario in which all prohibitions are removed and athletes can take any and all drugs. Some advocates would extend this freedom to surgical and genetic modifications as well.

One result is likely to be improved performances. Records will fall as athletes with chemically and perhaps surgically and genetically enhanced bodies will now run farther and faster, jump higher and longer, throw farther, and lift heavier weights. Athletes who eschew these technologies for whatever reason will find themselves unable to compete against those who choose enhancement.

Another likely result will be an acceleration and exacerbation of the pressures on athletes to use higher dosages and novel combinations of drugs in order to gain an edge on their competitors. The same dynamic, akin to an arms race, that now motivates some athletes to use banned performance enhancing drugs will drive athletes to more extreme patterns of use if the bans are lifted. One of the purported advantages of lifting the ban, that use, once visible, will become safer, is likely to be matched or overwhelmed by the countervailing pressures to use more and more drugs in combinations for which there is little or no evidence that such usage is safe.

Advocates claim that with the lifting of prohibition the veil of secrecy over drug use will also be lifted (Kayser and Smith, 2008). This advantage is likely to be illusory. We would know that athletes are using drugs, but not the drugs used or the doses. The sports equivalent of "trade secrets" will flourish as coaches, trainers, and self-appointed performance gurus peddle a profusion of secret concoctions and dosing schedules to athletes. Each will claim their program is superior; each will protect their commercial interests by shrouding their products and advice in secrecy. The unknown risks taken by athletes who use such drugs today will be multiplied. As performance-enhancing adventurism trickles down from elite athletes to amateur athletes who admire and desire to emulate their heroes, the public health implications will be amplified.

Additionally, performance on the playing field will become less and less a reflection of an athlete's natural talents and efforts, and more a manifestation of the technologies that experts are using to manipulate that athlete's anatomy, physiology and psychology. The meaning of excellence in sport will be forever changed. Many people who participate in and love sport will

regard that change as an erosion and diminishment of all that is good, beautiful and admirable about sport. Sport as it has been known, will be transformed and eclipsed by the triumph of the Performance Principle - maximum performance by any means, whatever the cost.

Conclusion: Doping, Values, and Anti-Doping

Athletes who dope are violating the regulative value of fair play. Some anti-doping critics argue that the problem is not with doping but with its prohibition. They claim that a good way to assure a "level playing field" is to allow everyone access to the performance enhancing drugs. But this alleged "solution" fails to protect other crucial values in sport, especially health and the values intertwined with the pursuit of excellence in performance.

The dynamic of competition in sport, the quest to seek constantly every competitive advantage, means that in the absence of effective anti-doping programs athletes will be driven to ever more extreme and experimental doping regimens in the quest for a competitive edge. No one can predict with certainty the outcome of such a "drug race," but it will almost surely not be benign. The health of athletes, elite and amateur, mature and young, will be threatened.

Finally, the meaning of the pursuit of excellence in sport would be profoundly affected. Excellence, rather than the virtuous perfection of athletes' natural talents and the acquisition of skills, would lie in the expertise of the pharmacologist or genetic engineer. Athletes would become less the agents of their performances than instruments in the designs of others.

Effective anti-doping is far from easy to achieve, and it seems less a battle to be decisively won than a continuing struggle to provide a good measure of justice and assurance. Athletes should be able to compete without performance-enhancing drugs, reasonably confident in the belief that the playing field is level. Fair play and health would be protected, while athletes could seek the values they find in the pursuit of athletic excellence.

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