

FURTHER READINGS

CHAPTER 7

This file contains additional readings from earlier editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, and some extra materials provided by Jay Coakley. These have not been included within the book as much of the content is explicitly focused on the USA, but users of the book may find these readings useful and interesting. Please feel free to send your feedback and/or suggest additional readings to us at jcoakley@uccs.edu or e.pike@chi.ac.uk.

Topic 1. Review of *Murderball*

Topic 2. Violence and animal sports

Topic 3: Violence in sports and social psychological dynamics

Topic 1. Review of *Murderball*

Murderball

Directed by Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro; 85 minutes; DVD (accompanied by special features); ThinkFilm

Reviewed by Jay Coakley

Murderball, a documentary about selected participants in men's wheelchair rugby, evokes mixed feelings in and between most viewers. This makes it useful in the classroom, because students usually want to explore the sources of their uneasiness. However, these sources are many, and instructors should do their homework to make the post-film discussion a full learning experience.

When *Murderball* was introduced at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival it won the American Documentary Audience Award and the Special Jury Prize for Editing. That was the beginning of a long string of best documentary awards and an Academy Award nomination. The film also received unqualified kudos from pop film reviewers, nearly all of whom viewed it through the eyes of white, middle-class, heterosexual, temporarily able-bodied men. They generally described the film as hard-hitting, inspiring, revealing, and stereotype busting; in all, the best film ever about disability.

Some reviewers were so pumped up by tough talking, macho rugby players and spectacular crashes between Terminator-like wheelchairs that they used men's locker room vocabulary to express themselves. For example, the United States Quad Rugby website (www.quadrugby.com/25-26/stories/murderballrevue.htm) noted that Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* gave *Murderball* his award for "Best Argument for Not Pitying Quadriplegics." Smith claimed that "the quadriplegic rugby players of this documentary taught us all a valuable lesson: Losing the use of your limbs in no way diminishes your desire to kick the crap out of your opponent" (Hooper 2005). Of course, for those inspired by this lesson, there will be others who find it worrisome.

After viewing *Murderball* five times – once with colleagues, twice with student groups, once with four women recruited for the occasion, and once alone, my mixed feelings remain strong. In one sense they are tied to *Murderball* being a "first film" that provides audiences with insider views of people with disabilities. "First" films and "first" television programs have casts from traditionally marginalized categories of people. They are usually eye-opening and provocative, but they inevitably lead to questions about category representation. A case in point was the scholarly critique of *The Cosby Show* after it debuted in 1984. Although it was the most successful U.S. television programme of the 80s, this 'first sitcom' about a black family was widely criticized for failing to represent most African Americans. *Murderball* can be criticized similarly, but it's not realistic to expect commercial films, even documentaries, to fully represent any diverse social category of people.

Issues of representation, however, are appropriate to discuss in classrooms, and *Murderball* makes this easy to do. Further, these issues introduce other discussion questions. Who plays, who doesn't? What forms of exclusion exist in wheelchair rugby and the culture produced and reproduced in association with it? What ideological themes pervade murderball culture, and whose lives, values and experiences do they represent? Relatedly, whose lives, values and experiences are threatened, demeaned and marginalized in this culture?

Representation issues will certainly be on the minds of viewers with disabilities. For men with disabilities caused by accidents after adolescence, the film offers very selective images of what is possible when you immerse yourself into an activity that provides joy and satisfaction. This will be inspiring to those who have not thought critically about ideology and the circumstances of their accidents. For men who have never lived without disabilities or cannot remember when they did, parts of the film will be reaffirming because they show to able-bodied viewers the exhausting work required to live without the full use of two or more limbs. However, other parts may be defined as offensive and even counterproductive to the political goals of organizations representing people with disabilities. Overall, the film does little to disrupt “the empire of the normal.”

For most women with disabilities, the film offers very little with which they can identify. This doesn't mean that some will not enjoy *Murderball*, even if the values and experiences of most women are unrelated to the heavily masculinized orientations and representations of the main characters in the film.

As representation questions become increasingly critical, classroom discussion may be inhibited by fears of offending people socially labelled “disabled.” This is when Goffman's *Stigma* (1963) could be consulted, along with more current research (Heatherton et al. 2000). This makes possible discussions about the social construction of disability and historical variations in prevailing ideas and beliefs about disability. Further, after watching wheelchair rugby and listening to players talk about their bodies, it becomes clear that ‘normalcy’ is secured through sociality and that people have their normalcy reaffirmed only when their presentation of self lead others to do so.

Viewing *Murderball* helps people realize that disabilities and the people who live with them are best understood when viewed in personal, social, and cultural context. Portraying men, most of whom broke their necks while engaging in risky activities, negotiate their lives in the structural context of wealthy post-industrial societies is a worthy project. But when viewing *Murderball*, it's also worth noting that wheelchair rugby requires resources unavailable in most of the world and that rugby participation brings status and self-satisfaction only when widely shared ideologies glorify competition, individual achievement, physical domination, and masculinity defined in terms of physical and mental toughness. Finally, rugby culture reinforces these ideologies, even when played in wheelchairs.

The filmmakers did not set out to critique ideologies in wealthy societies or inequalities in the distribution of global resources. They wanted to provide a sensitive, frank, entertaining portrayal of selected men on the U.S Wheelchair Rugby Team. They clearly achieved their goal by showing men with fully or partially impaired limbs getting out of bed, dressing, moving themselves into wheelchairs, and dealing with access challenges as they make their way around homes, airports, hotel rooms, and in and out of automobiles. Neither these nor the rugby action scenes allow viewers to pity or dismiss the young men. Viewers will not like or want to befriend every man in the film, but they will learn that each faces challenges and has a perspective worth knowing and understanding.

The most useful scenes for learning purposes involved the men as they relaxed and talked about everyday life. For example, after post game beers, one of their conversations turns deeply personal and reveals the complexity, flaws, and humanity of these young men. Other scenes do the same. For example, Joe Soares, a coach obsessively focused on conquering the U.S. team from which he was cut a few years before, talks tenderly with his son after realizing that the young man possesses valued attributes outside those he uses to evaluate himself and his rugby

players as men. Mark Zupan, the hyper-aggressive, trash-talking team captain is seen in tender, mutually supportive moments with his girlfriend. The relationship between Zupan and Chris Igoe, who drove the truck from which Mark was ejected in an accident, reveals former best friends coping with tensions caused by mutual complicity in the circumstances leading to Mark's paralyzing injuries.

Overall, *Murderball* is a must see for historians concerned with disabilities in society. It foments an uneasiness that facilitates discussion and learning. And it is, after all, a "first."

References

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- Hooper, Ed. 2005. Game On! *Ragged Edge Online*. www.ragged-edge-mag.com/reviews/hoopermurderball.html (retrieved 18 October, 2007).

Topic 2. Violence and animal sports

Dogfighting making a comeback in Afghanistan

A ban on cockfighting, but tradition lives on

The dark side of horse racing

Dominicans say cockfighting is in their blood.

Bullfighting is dead! Long live the bullfight!

Race illustrates brutal side of sport.

During 2008, these were among the news articles on animals in sports. However, this topic has received almost no attention in the sociology of sport. Most scholars in the field are aware of the animals used in Roman spectacles as gladiators battled wild animals to the death. Bullfights remain popular events in Spain, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America. Rodeo, especially events such as bull riding, bronco riding, and calf roping, is growing in popularity in North America. Dogfighting appears to be regaining popularity in certain regions of the world, and cockfighting remains highly popular among certain segments of people in the United States and worldwide. Horseracing and dog racing in North America and Europe have been popular for many years despite injuries to and overbreeding of animals.

When the thoroughbred race horses Eight Belles and Barbaro both breaking down on nationally televised Triple Crown races in 2007 and 2008, there was much discussion of the ways that race horses are bred, trained, and treated and how horse racing is regulated. Eight Belles shattered her leg during a race and had to be euthanized on the track—a scene that millions watched as it was replayed on many video sources.

As rural lifestyles fade and people living in urban areas see animals more as domesticated pets than “beasts of burden” and commercial property, norms related to the treatment of animals change. In the process, ethical questions are raised in connection with the use of animals in entertainment and spectacles. This has certainly been the case in the United States where most people have never experienced rural life and the place of animals in it. As a result, questions about violence and animals in sports become raised more frequently.

In one of the only sociology of sport publications on animal sports, Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young analyze greyhound racing as sports-related violence. The violence occurs during breeding, housing, training, and the disposal of the dogs when they can no longer race (see reference below).

Sociologist Linda Kalof, director of a relatively new Animal Studies Research Center at Michigan State University (<http://www.animalstudies.msu.edu>) has written about animals and sports and will be publishing more on this topic in 2009 and 2010. Among her current books are:

Kalof, Linda, and Amy Fitzgerald, eds. 2007. *The animals reader: The essential classic and contemporary writings*. Berg. www.bergpublishers.com/?tabid=1804

Kalof, Linda, and Brigitte Resl. 2007. *A cultural history of animals* (Volumes 1–6). Berg. <http://www.bergpublishers.com/?TabId=2488¤treview=0>

Kalof, Linda. 2007. *Looking at animals in human history* <http://www.reaktionbooks.co.uk/book.html?id=297>

Other sources include the following:

- Atkinson, Michael, and Kevin Young. 2005. Reservoir dogs: Greyhound racing as sports-related violence. *International Review of the Sociology of Sport* 40, 3: 335–356.
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Topic 3: Violence in sports and social psychological dynamics

As I revised Chapter 7 to make it more sociological I deleted (in 2001) most of the social psychological materials contained in previous editions. These materials are posted here for those who wish to refer to or use them.

Instinct theory and the origins of aggression: Do sports control and moderate aggression in society?

Those who argue that sports serve to control aggressive behavior in society generally base their case on

- assumptions about human instincts
- ideas about how frustration is “released” through sport participation
- information describing what people learn during sport participation

We will discuss each of these three arguments for this case that sports control aggression.

Human Instincts and Aggression

Some people still believe that all forms of aggressive behavior are grounded in instincts. Theoretical support for this belief is often based on the works of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts. According to Freudian theory, all humans possess a death instinct, sometimes referred to as the “death wish.” This death instinct takes the form of destructive energy in a person’s psyche. If this energy is not released intentionally, eventually it will build up and be released involuntarily, in the form of aggression against self (the extreme form of which is suicide) or others (the extreme forms of which are murder and warfare). The only way to control this potentially destructive energy is to release it safely through an aggressively expressive activity. This safe form of release is called a catharsis, and its operation resembles what happens when steam is slowly released from a pressure cooker: it keeps the pot from blowing up.

Even though Freudian theory leaves unanswered many questions about the nature and operation of the death instinct and the aggression it generates, some people have applied it to sports. Their conclusion is that playing and watching sports allows players and spectators to safely release, or “drain off,” innate aggressive energy; that is, sports, especially contact sports, provide a catharsis for instinct-based aggressive tendencies that inevitably build up over time in human beings.

Many ethologists have used a combination of Freudian and evolutionary theories to make a similar case. Ethologists are scientists concerned with the biological foundations of animal behavior; they usually study the behavior patterns of insects, fish, birds, or nonhuman animals in their natural habitats. Using their research to explain human behavior, some have suggested that aggression is a product of evolution, and that without aggressive instincts, no species (including humans) would survive. Some have assumed that humans can safely release aggressive energy through playing and watching sports.

Peter Marsh, a British social psychologist, has expanded the ideas of both Freud and the ethologists to argue that sport events serve as occasions for “ritual confrontations” between fans. After observing the behavior of young, male soccer fans in England, he concluded that such confrontations are relatively harmless, symbolic displays of aggressive energy. They are highly structured and predictable, and they serve to control the extent to which the fans express aggression in other spheres of life. In fact, Marsh argues that if the aggressive behaviors

associated with soccer were suppressed, the rates of violent crime and fighting behavior in nonsport settings would increase.

The assumption underlying all three of these arguments is that humans are instinctively aggressive and that sports, especially contact sports, provide safe “outlets” for aggressive behaviors that people must express in some form. This assumption is often built into the language that sportspeople use when they describe their own sport participation. For example, Mike Ditka, an NFL player in the 1970s, an NFL coach in the 1980s, and an NFL TV commentator for football and then a coach once more in the 1990s, explained in these words:

There’s no question about it. I feel a lot of football players build up a lot of anxieties in the off-season because they have no outlets for them... I’m an overactive person anyway and if I don’t get rid of this energy, it just builds up in me and then I blow it off in some other way which is not really the proper way.

In Ditka’s mind, participation in heavy contact sports is a safe “outlet” protecting the rest of society from potentially destructive expressions of his “natural” aggressive energy. In fact, he might say that in his present role of coach, he releases his aggressive energy as he watches football games and vicariously experiences the aggressive behaviors of players on the field. Ditka probably believes that for both participants and avid observers, football serves as a catharsis, to purge aggressive energy.

Problems with Instinct Theory

The use of instinct theory to argue that sports control and moderate aggression in society suffers from the following four weaknesses.

First, research does not support the notion that aggressive behavior in humans is the product of biologically based destructive energy. Studies of behavior among insects, fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals have suggested that some aggression among nonhuman species may be grounded in instincts-but these studies are of little help in developing a theory of human aggression. Human behavior is much more complex than the behavior of other species, because it is grounded in a combination of culture, self-reflection, and ever-changing definitions and meanings. This means not that biology is irrelevant, but that the influence of biology in human behavior does not occur through instincts. In fact, even if someone could make a convincing case that humans do have aggressive instincts, this would tell us little about human behavior. We would still have to explain why rates of aggression vary from one group to another, why they vary over time in any single group, why aggression is highly correlated with certain social conditions, and why most human beings have to be coerced or socialized to behave in aggressive and violent ways. In fact, research suggests that the tendency for humans to cooperate is more common than any tendency to be aggressive.

A second problem is that instinct arguments often assume that all sports are effective outlets for the presumed aggressive energies of both players and spectators. However, it is quite certain that different sports provide different opportunities to engage in aggressive behaviors. For example, some sports involve no direct physical contact between opponents, and provide few opportunities for players to engage in actual aggressive behavior. Much of what occurs in most sports, even in many power and performance sports, would be a poor substitute for real aggression. Furthermore, many athletes define their sport experiences in ways that de-emphasize or eliminate expressions of aggression. This is the dominant pattern in pleasure and participation sports, which have the goal of connecting with others as challenges are faced, rather than overpowering and dominating others in aggressive ways.

A third problem with instinct theory is that research does not support the idea that sport participation provides a catharsis for supposed instinct-based aggressive energy. Contrary to the predictions of instinct theory, numerous studies show that contact sports exist and thrive in the same societies that have high rates of aggression and violence. If sports served as a catharsis for aggressive energy, the studies would show the exact opposite!

The fourth problem with instinct arguments is that they continually refer to the aggressive behavior of men, ignoring women and the ways presumed aggressive instincts and impulses might be released in the behavior of women. Women are not involved in warfare, group violence, or heavy contact sports to the same extent as men; what, then, are the outlets for their presumed aggressive instincts? If women turn aggressive energy inward, their suicide rates should be much higher than the rates for men-but this is not the case. If women are releasing their aggressive impulses in other ways, maybe men should use them as role models; it might make the world a safer place for all of us.

In summary, the instinct argument provides no valid support for the notion that sport participation can serve as a cure for violent behavior among athletes or spectators. However, this argument remains popular; many people still use what I call the “language of catharsis” in their everyday conversations about human behavior. We often hear references to “aggressive tendencies” and “releasing pent-up feelings of aggression”; the speakers fail to realize that the theoretical model on which they base their statements is faulty and invalid.

Frustration-aggression theory

“I had to let some frustration out; otherwise I was going to kill someone. Better the racket.” This was stated by Mark Philippoussis after he destroyed his tennis racket during a match during the 2000 tennis season when he lost the second set after being up 4-1 in a tiebreak.

Some have argued that since aggression is frequently the result of frustration, and since frustration is “released” through sports, people would be less aggressive if they played and watched sports more frequently. Of course, it would be convenient if this were true-if we could deal with all of our feelings of frustration in such a way, and aggression could be controlled by having everyone play and watch sports. But there is no evidence that playing racquetball, soccer, or any other sport for an hour eliminates the sources of frustration in a person’s life and makes the person less aggressive in the process. Playing sports may make us physically tired, and it may temporarily relieve feelings of frustration, but no matter how hard someone plays, the situation or person that was the source of frustration today will still be there tomorrow. Playing sports does not change the frustrating behaviors of other people or the sources of frustration at home or work.

How about the possibility that vigorous physical exercise in sports makes people less violent by producing physiological or biochemical changes in the body? This is an interesting possibility. People frequently say they “feel better”-more relaxed and less stressed-after vigorous physical exercise. Some even say they feel as though they have “released” tensions in their bodies. And in fact, research shows that among some people, vigorous exercise is associated with reductions in (1) muscular tension, (2) certain forms of anxiety, and (3) depression. However, researchers do not know what causes these changes. Are they direct outgrowths of the physiological and biochemical consequences of exercise, or does strenuous physical exercise simply serve as a “time out” in the daily schedules of people who are temporarily bored, busy, or mildly depressed about how things are going in their lives? Furthermore, researchers do not

know if any of the physical and psychological changes that accompany vigorous exercise actually reduce the occurrence of aggressive behaviors.

If the intent to do harm or inflict injury on others does decline after a person plays sports, this probably occurs because intense involvement in any activity can put time between a person and the frustrating conditions in the rest of life. During this period of time, people can calm themselves down or outline rational, nonaggressive strategies for dealing effectively with the sources of frustration in their lives. But the type of activity may not matter; playing a game of chess, meditating, or reading a good book could be as helpful as sports, if people became intensely involved in these activities. Of course, sports often are played with friends; this means that they provide social occasions in which frustrated people can receive advice from others on strategies for dealing with the sources of frustration at home or work. So in addition to providing a “time out,” playing sports may involve social interaction that is likely to discourage the use of aggression in response to frustrations.

My guess is that we often see playing sports as a way to relieve frustration mainly because it involves intense concentration and often produces physical exhaustion. For most of us, participation in sports puts us in a setting separate from the more serious concerns of our daily existence; gyms, tracks, or golf courses often are worlds of their own. This, along with the heavy focus on physical movement and physical challenges, and the social interaction that often occurs while we participate, makes sport refreshingly unique in most of our lives. As a woman who recently took up boxing explains, “You’re hitting a bag. You’re not ...in front of a television or reading a magazine. All that frustration from work, you’re getting rid of it”. Of course, she does not claim that boxing eliminates the sources of frustration in her life, or that it makes her less aggressive; she just says boxing makes her feel less frustrated when she leaves the gym. And unless her fellow boxers tell her to punch her boss’s lights out, she is likely to think of nonaggressive ways of handling things at work tomorrow.

However, not all people leave the gym less frustrated than they were when they came in. For example, those who use sports as a means of proving themselves rather than expressing themselves often discover that playing sports actually creates frustration in their lives. When these people lose or play poorly, they may leave the gym or playing field with more aggressive feelings than they had when they began their sport participation.

Just as there is nothing magic or automatic about playing sports and getting rid of frustrations, there is no evidence that watching sports serves to eliminate frustrations in the lives of spectators. Watching sports may temporarily distract people from the things causing them to be frustrated, but this does not necessarily make them more mellow and less aggressive in the rest of their lives.

In summary, it is difficult to argue that people can control aggression by using sports to release or eliminate frustrations. However, there is some support for the notion that sports can serve as a valuable “time out” separating people from the sources of frustration in their lives. We do not know at this point whether this makes them less aggressive. Nor do we know if this occurs on a collective level, so that rates of aggression in society as a whole would decline if sport participation were more widespread. Most existing evidence points against this possibility.

Frustration and tension excitement

For frustration among fans to give rise to aggression, the following three things must happen:

1. There must be enough identification with players or teams to provide the basis for frustration in connection with their fate on the field of play.

2. When fans become frustrated, anger must be the dominant emotion they feel.
3. Opportunities for aggression, stimulus cues, and social support for acting aggressively must be present.

In many cases, individual spectators may not identify with players or teams to the extent that is necessary to produce frustration. However, when their identification is strong enough and when their frustration is followed by anger, the aggression of spectators is best prevented by the absence of opportunities, stimulus cues, and social support for aggressive actions.

This frustration-aggression model has led to policies that (1) separate spectators from opposing teams during and after games, (2) prevent spectators from bringing to the arena objects that they can throw from the stands, and (3) emphasize an orderly flow of people around the arena. Contact between angered losers and exuberant winners creates obvious opportunities for violence. Objects that people can throw, such as bottles and cans, can become stimulus cues for violent behavior when an official makes a “bad call” or when players and coaches do not live up to expectations. And the absence of explicit behavioral guidelines for spectators increases the probability that some groups of fans will create their own ideas about how they should express their anger.

In summary, the playing and watching of sports does regularly generate frustration. Frustration may lead to aggression, but this occurs only under certain conditions. Rules in sports and sport facilities have been designed to limit the opportunities, stimulus cues, and social support for aggression among players and spectators. For example, use of the hockey stick, football helmet, or baseball as weapons brings heavy penalties in most cases. Even the use of intimidation has been regulated in some sports, although this is difficult to do.

Those who benefit from the popularity of certain sports are sometimes hesitant to make rules that discourage spontaneous displays of emotions by players and spectators. Most of us who enjoy sports would not like to see all such displays discouraged, even though we object to aggression on the field and in the stands.

Finally, there is little evidence that aggression resulting from sport-related frustration actually carries over into non-sport settings. There are cases of bar fights and domestic violence that might be related to such frustration, but there is no systematic research enabling us to say when and how often such carryover might occur.

Violence begets violence: Cultural patterning theory

Instead of allowing people to release the pent-up energy that instinct theorists say is the foundation of all aggression, contact sports seem to be expressions of the same cultural patterns and orientations that underlie warfare and high rates of murder, domestic violence, and assault. For example, in a carefully designed comparison of ten peaceful societies and ten societies with long traditions of fighting many wars, anthropologist Richard Sipes found that contact sports were popular in 90 percent of the warlike societies and in only 20 percent of the peaceful societies. This clearly contradicts the notion that contact sports serve a cathartic function for players or spectators.

Other studies have shown that homicide rates in the United States increase immediately after television broadcasts of highly publicized boxing matches, and that military activity is positively related to the popularity of contact sports in countries participating in the Olympic Games. Historical research in England shows a similar pattern: the level of violence in dominant sport forms has gone hand in hand with the level of violence in a particular society. Sports do not seem to be “draining off” aggressive energy.

Note: references for this topic are found in Chapter 7 of the 6th edition of *Sport in Society*.