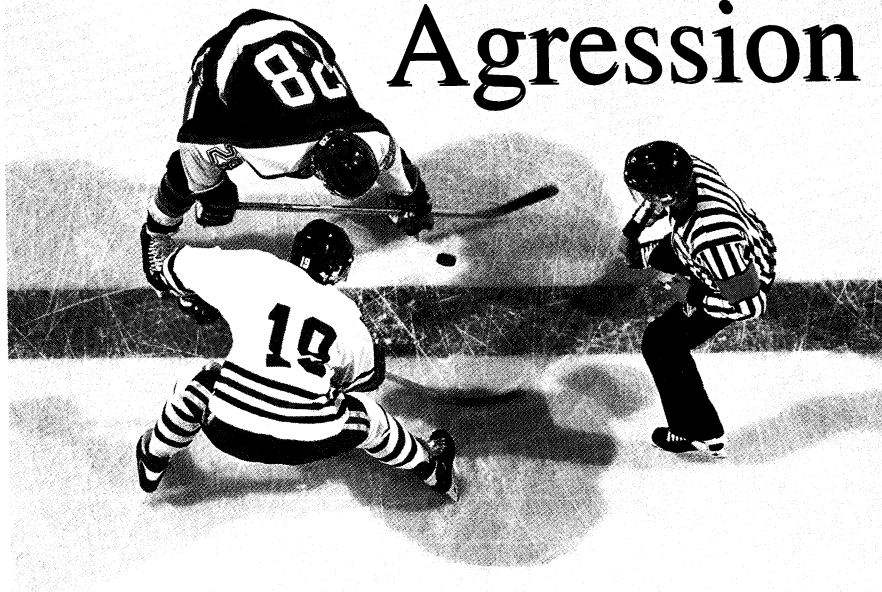


# Aggression in Sport

by Todd Loughhead



Over the past thirty years — as the media regularly report — violence in society has steadily escalated. No aspect of society is immune to it, not even the realm of sport. In fact, although stemming violent acts in daily life is at least attempted by our justice system, sport is a context in which aggressive play is often tolerated, or worse, encouraged. As a result, those in the sports domain continue to witness an increase in violent acts perpetrated by its participants.

Despite the rise of violence in sports, research in the area occurs sporadically. Consequently, there are people both outside and within the world of sport who refuse to admit that a problem even exists. Yet it is rare for a day to go by without some mention, in the newspaper or on the television, of a bench brawl, or a mound-rushing or stick-swinging incident. There are numerous examples of sports violence that have been documented and generally accepted for decades; many of us can remember the bench-clearing brawl between the Canadian and Soviet teams at the 1987 World Junior Championships, or Bobby Clarke injuring Valery Kharlamov in the 1972 Canada Cup series. For a more recent example, we only have to look at Tie Domi of the Toronto Maple Leafs: Domi's punching of an unsuspecting member of the New York Rangers caused a concussion and resulted in stitches being required for the back of the player's head.

It would be a mistake to believe that this sort of thing occurs only at the elite or professional levels. Both the Paul Smithers and Markus Quinn incidents exemplify cases of violence at the youth sport level. The Paul Smithers case involved a fight between two teenage minor hockey players outside an arena following their game. As a result of this fight, Smithers was convicted of manslaughter and received a six-month jail sentence. The Markus Quinn case involved a pre-game brawl between two rival teams. Members of the opposing team crossed the centre line during the warm-up and instigated a fight. During the altercation, Quinn received a punch to the side of the head that caused a severe concussion.

Traditionally, the reaction to displays of violence in sport has been a not-too-concerned shrug accompanied by comments such as: "It's part of the game"; "No one ever gets hurt"; or "The athletes are just letting off some steam." Those who subscribe to this viewpoint argue that sport serves as a safety-valve through which aggression can be released in a controlled manner, with little effect on either the athletes or the rest of society. Most researchers, however, have disclaimed this "aggression as catharsis" view.

The most supported explanation of why aggression occurs in sport has been labelled "The Social Learning Theory" (Albert Bandura, 1973). The basic premise of this theory is that

aggression is a learned behaviour, and that sport may be teaching people to be more aggressive. As a result, people display aggression because they have learned it is profitable to do so. For instance, some hockey league players move through the minor hockey system because they are good fighters. With this fact in mind, it is quite understandable that, when asked what qualities a coach looks for in the selection of a player, many athletes answered, "being aggressive all the time," "possessing physical size and strength," and "having guts and courage."

Assuming acceptance of The Social Learning Theory as it pertains to aggression in sport, it is clear that coaches have a great deal of influence over the attitudes learned and developed by their athletes. As researcher Robert Corran aptly states, "much of the learning of sport participants can be directed effectively by a coach away from the excessive aggression which has become so much more dominant in sport today."

One of the stumbling-blocks that has hindered any examination of the subject of aggression in sport is the difficulty that exists in defining the term. The following section looks at the concept of "aggression."

## Defining "Aggression"

Although "aggression" is a term frequently used nowadays, there is

some confusion as to its meaning. The term is used to describe a violent outbreak, such as a fight, but is also used when an athlete competes hard and gives a one hundred per cent effort. Further confusion is added when a value judgment or emotional connotation is attached to the term. For instance, some aggressive behaviour is considered "bad," while some is considered "good." As well, value judgments are often inconsistent regarding aggressive behaviour. As a result, it is considered acceptable to fight in certain situations, but not in others. Clearly, these inconsistencies have served to perpetuate the problem.

So how do we define "aggression"? Sports sociologist Michael Smith says it best (and with greatest simplicity) by defining "aggression" as "any behaviour intended to injure another person, psychologically or physically." Consequently, there are three elements involved with the act of aggres-

sion. Two types of aggression have been identified in the sport psychology literature (Michael Smith, 1983): "instrumental aggression" and "hostile aggression." In both types, the intent is to harm. However, there is a difference in terms of the goals being sought. Instrumental aggression serves as a means to a particular objective — such as winning a game, acquiring money, or gaining prestige. Injury to the opponent is involved in the athlete's quest to achieve the objective. This type of injury is impersonal and designed to limit the effectiveness of the opponent. On the other hand, the primary objective of hostile aggression is to injure another person deliberately. The intent here is to make the victim suffer, either physically, psychologically, or both.

Another category of behaviour which is often confused with aggression is "assertiveness." Assertiveness involves the use of legitimate physical

## Coach/Player Relationship

A recent survey was completed by thirty minor hockey league coaches and their players. The survey examined the question of which type of aggression, instrumental or hostile, is found by coaches and players to be more acceptable in sport contexts. Also recorded was the actual behaviour of the players; their penalties were classified as either instrumental or hostile violations.

The results of the survey reveal that both minor hockey league coaches and players view instrumental aggression, the type of aggression where the objective is to receive some sort of reward, as a more acceptable behaviour. This conclusion would tend to suggest that hostile aggression, the type associated with deliberately harming an opponent, is less acceptable. It also may suggest that there is an overemphasis placed on winning.

It would appear that coaches approve the use of instrumental aggression because they have learned that it is advantageous to do so. Michael Smith notes that hockey coaches encourage aggressive play because of what it symbolizes — character development — and for its utility in helping the team win games. Since the results of the present survey tend to suggest that minor hockey league coaches are more approving of instrumental aggression, it is not unreasonable to think that these coaches are conveying an ambiguous message to their players. Field notes from Michael Smith support this: "It's important to be tough. I don't think it's all-important that you have to go out and knock somebody right off, but it's important to be tough, because if trouble comes you have to stand up." It is obvious how players can perceive this sort of attitude as a cue from their coaches that they want to see more aggressive play.

Although players, according to the survey, are also more approving of instrumental aggression, their actual behaviour on the ice indicates otherwise. Players received twice as many hostile-type penalties than instrumental-type penalties. Even though they said that they were less approving of hostile aggression, it seems plausible that once a game is under way they may disregard their personal views — and as a result, receive higher amounts of hostile-aggression penalties. In other words, players realize what it



sion: First, aggression involves a behaviour; thinking about inflicting harm is not aggression. Second, there must be intent to inflict harm; accidental harm does not qualify as an act of aggression. And finally, there is an expectation that the aggression will be successful and the person will be harmed.

## Types of Aggression

Beyond the above outline of the elements that constitute aggression, one further distinction would prove benefi-

or verbal force to achieve one's goal. According to this definition, there is no intent to harm the opponent.

With The Social Learning Theory in mind, coach and soccer player Joseph Luxbacher notes that the potential exists for behavioural patterns to be influenced, altered or changed. And as far as athletes are concerned, we know from previous studies that coaches, because of their status within a team, are in the most favourable position to bring about this influencing, altering or changing.

takes to advance through the system regardless of their own beliefs.

The survey also examined the relationship between players' views on aggression and the views of coaches. Interestingly, the attitudes of the players seem to be unrelated to the attitudes of the coaches. However, player attitude does change when the "coach factor" intervenes. For instance, Joseph Luxbacher, and sports psychologists Dawn Stephens and Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier have found, in previous work (1996), that players who perceive their coach to have a win-at-all-cost philosophy display higher levels of aggression. Combining the results of this earlier research with the findings of the present survey, we see with greater clarity just how influential a role a coach plays within a team.

Many coaches view aggression as an essential element of their sport. Many coaches and players advance through systems in which aggressive acts are not only required, but respected. In spite of this, coaches are in a position to promote less violent play. They must be aware that the messages they convey concerning aggression may carry over to their athletes. Too often, athletes are portrayed as being the cause of violence in sports; to give a complete picture, the focus should shift to include the part played by coaches in bringing about this phenomenon.

Since a great deal of learning occurs during an individual's scholastic years, it is vital that school coaches, administrators and officials find effective ways to deal with the problem of aggression.

## Implications and Recommendations

Violence in sport can be reduced. It is time for those who have the most influence with athletes to discourage aggression. Coaches, administrators and school officials wield a considerable amount of power in the decision-making processes within their associations. If these individuals are well-informed on the topic of aggression — particularly on ways to reduce aggression — then they are in a position to change attitudes and beliefs. If present attitudes and beliefs regarding aggression are allowed to continue, then there will be little hope of solving the problem. The following section outlines ways for coaches to reduce aggression in sport:

- (1) Coaches need to be made aware of the potential dangers of aggression in sport. A fair play code-of-conduct should be made mandatory. For instance, teams (or individuals) might be awarded points based not only on the outcome of a game, but also on their behaviour during the game. Each team might begin with six behaviour points. Then, whenever a rule is violated, one point is deducted, until the team exceeds the limit determined by league administrators.
- (2) There is a need for academics, coaches, administrators and school officials to work closely with coaching certification programs. Very little information is provided to coaches regarding the perils of aggression. Coaching certification programs need to be designed to incorporate the topic of aggression directly into the curriculum. For example, in-service workshops should be developed for dealing with aggression on the part of both players and coaches.
- (3) Both types of aggression are unacceptable. Even though coaches and players view instrumental as more acceptable than hostile aggression, the behaviour of hockey players indicates otherwise. This type of finding not only reminds us of the perils of aggression, but also directs us towards ways of developing strategies to curtail this phenomenon.
- (4) It is time to re-evaluate the exact meaning of the term "aggression." There exists the possibility that some coaches who encourage their players to be more *aggressive* are actually asking them to be more *assertive*. The term "assertiveness" implies no intent to injure and emphasizes the use of legitimate force. Coaches need to educate their athletes by differentiating between these terms. In doing so, they will begin the process of eliminating the confusion that surrounds the meaning of aggression.
- (5) Coaches cannot underestimate their influence as role models. They must show athletes that aggression does not pay. One way of doing this is to reduce the positive reinforcement for aggression. Or to provide *negative* reinforcement whenever an aggressive act is committed. In this way, athletes will soon learn that aggressive behaviour is not acceptable.
- (6) Coaches need to help players perceive their opponents in a more positive manner. As Robert Corran suggests, "emphasizing such positive virtues would do a great deal to reduce or eliminate the possibility of violence during athletic contests." Athletes should focus on their own performance, always with a sense of fair play and sportsmanship. If an opponent is perceived in a positive way, little aggression will be directed toward him or her.
- (7) Coaches should prepare their athletes, prior to the start of a contest, by educating them as to what they should expect during the game. In this way, athletes learn how to deal with various situations before they develop into aggressive incidents.



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