A Theoretical Perspective on Understanding Ethical Principles in Sports

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Abstract: Physical education as well as sports is human activity that supports holistically the development of individuals. Sport is recognized as an individual activity that provides the opportunity for self-knowledge, self-expression and fulfillment of personal achievement. Sport supports skill acquisition and demonstration of skill, a joyful life, a well-being state and a good health. Moreover, sport also involves us in a collective effort to pursue human excellence, giving us the real opportunity for social interaction. Followed by discipline, sport becomes a source of pleasure, but more than that, sport brings inspiration to individuals, brings them together through their cultures and differences, for a common purpose, thus creating bonds where previously there were social divisions. Besides all its attributes, from a social-constructionist paradigm, sport can contribute to the prosperity of society and can stimulate friendships between nations, at the same time calling for co-responsibility. Starting from responsibility as a social value, we thus understand how sport is the environment responsible for the application of rules and for adherence to moral and ethical values, such as respect for the dignity of the person, in a reciprocal way, solidarity, equity, fairness, transparency.

The present paper comes to briefly approach, from a theoretical point of view, the importance of ethics at the level of sports, and to highlight those ethical values (through a selection of ethical principles) on which the sport practice is based, through the lens of international specialized literature.

Keywords: ethics; sports; sport as social activity; sport as set of rules; sport as play; ethical principles; fairness and integrity; respect and inclusivity; responsibility and governance.

Sport practice and its definitions

Before continuing in the approach to sports ethics, we consider it important to delimit in a descriptive manner what sport actually means. Grion (2022) in his synthesis published in Wood in Sport Equipment, defines sport from 3 perspectives: of the play, of a set of rules, and of social activity.

Sport as a play

Sport as a play is understood starting from the idea of Johan Huizinga in the work Homo Ludens, for which play is that act of freedom distinguished from ordinary life, an activity that is an end in itself and that is associated with feelings of tension and joy at the same time; in the play, the individual tests himself deliberately, both in comparison with himself and in competition with others, experiencing that sense of success, by doing something that challenges him/her (Grion, 2022; Huizinga, 1938; Bandura, 1997). From the approach of Huizinga (1938) the characteristics of the play activity were reconsidered in order to gradually attribute to it a purpose and a set of rules, and Suits (1988) bring the following characteristics to a play. The play in the sports sense is a game which evolved towards a more advanced activity that becomes controlled and governed by a set of rules. The game then turns into a sport when it displays a set of 4 clear rules: 1) involves an element of skill, 2) the skill that is tested in the game must be of a physical nature; 3) the game must attract the widest possible audience to follow it and 4) the game must acquire a certain level of stability, supported to develop by an organization/institution (Grion, 2022; Suits, 1988).

In his book Homo Ludens (1938), Huizinga argues that play and culture are closely related, and sport is a form of ritualized play.

How is sport a set of rules?

Sport, like other areas of life, needs structure and order to function properly. This is where the role of rules comes in, establishing a common framework for all participants.

Another way to refer to sport is the association between sport and rules. Suits distinguishes between constitutive rules for sports - those rules that define the purpose of the game as well as the means required to implement it - and regulatory rules - which ensure the finesse in the performance of the game, whatever that may be. When referring to the regulatory rules, Suits shows the limits of the game, the non-compliance with the regulations leading to the getting attention of the athlete in the game.
(example: when in a football game, the player takes the ball with his hands and starts running). The purpose of the regulation rules is to encourage the player to respect the game (Grion, 2022; Suits, 1988). In a nutshell, we will expose some of the ways sport is a set of rules:

1. Definition of the game: The rules define the fundamental elements of a sport, such as: goal of the game (eg scoring more goals than the opponent); necessary equipment (eg ball, rackets, net); duration of the game (eg: two halves of 45 minutes); number of players (ex: 11 players per team in soccer).

2. Ensuring fair play: The rules promote fair and equitable play for all by: prohibition of unsportsmanlike behavior (eg: aggression, cheating); establishing sanctions for breaking the rules (eg yellow/red cards); ensuring an impartial referee to enforce the rules (Sekot, 2011).

3. Creating a safe environment: The rules contribute to the safety of players by: establishing the necessary protective equipment (ex: helmet in American football); prohibition of dangerous maneuvers (ex: hard tackling in rugby); implementation of first aid procedures in case of accidents.

4. Stimulating competition: The rules create a fair system of competition where: all players/teams have an equal chance to win; performance is evaluated objectively (eg by score, ranking); victory and effort are rewarded.

5. Facilitating the evolution of the sport: The rules can be adapted and changed over time to: improve the sports performance; increases player safety; adapt the sport to the current needs and context.

Although the rules may seem restrictive at first glance, they are essential to the proper functioning of the sport. They provide a clear and transparent framework, ensuring fair, safe and competitive play for all involved (Chappelet, 2018).

In addition to those listed above, the rules of the sport can have other benefits: it develops discipline and respect for authority; it encourages collaboration and teamwork; it stimulates the spirit of fair play and respect for the opponent; it provides a way to relax and have fun. In his book Discipline and Punish (1977), Michel Foucault argues that sport is a form of bodily discipline that serves to control and conform individuals (Foucault, 1977). The rules of the sport are the foundation upon which the entire sporting experience is built. They enable sport to be an enjoyable, safe and competitive activity for both participants and spectators.
Ways of manifesting sport as a social activity

Caillois (2001) considers the game as a public event, in the sense that at least two players are needed to play a game, sport is basically a social practice. Moreover, it is no accident that the players in a game are called competitors and the challenge in which they are engaged is known as a competition, the game considering a context in which "we" takes precedence over "I". McIntyre takes competitive games as an example to illustrate his concept of "social practice" a socially established, coherent and complex cooperative human activity (Grion, 2022). Sport becomes an important social activity for several reasons:

1. Social interaction: Sports provide an excellent opportunity to interact with other people, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity or social status (Nucci & Young-Shim, 2005). If we consider team sports, such as basketball, football, volleyball, etc., involve collaboration and communication to achieve a common goal, thus strengthening interpersonal relationships and team spirit. The individual sports, such as tennis, running, swimming, etc., can facilitate connection with other enthusiasts of the same sport, creating a common base of interests and discussions (Kim et al., 2022).

2. Development of social skills: Sport contributes to the development of essential social skills, such as communication (athletes learn to communicate effectively with teammates, coaches, and opponents), leadership (sports provide opportunities to assume leadership roles and motivate others); respect (athletes learn to respect the rules of the game, opponents and the authority of referees) conflict management (sports can involve conflict situations, which athletes learn to manage constructively (Pauley, 2023).

3. Social inclusion: Sport has an important role in promoting social inclusion, offering equal opportunities to all, regardless of their background. There are numerous sports programs dedicated to people with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, etc., contributing to their social integration. Sport can combat stereotypes and prejudices, promoting tolerance and respect for diversity. Former president of South Africa and anti-apartheid activist, Mandela used sport as a tool for reconciliation and social change. He believed that sport could promote fair play and equality, and he worked to break down racial barriers in South African sports (Slade, 2021).

4. Health and well-being: Sport has significant benefits for the physical and mental health of practitioners. Sport contributes to maintaining an optimal physical condition, preventing chronic diseases and improving the quality of life. Sports can reduce stress, anxiety and depression, contributing to a positive mental state (Eather et al., 2023).
5. Identity and belonging: Sport can be a source of identity and belonging to a community (Wann et al., 2015; Heere & James, 2007).

Ethical principles in sport practice

In a study carried out in 2017, by Agnew, D., Henderson, P., & Woods, starting from the premise that athletes are good models to follow, who in the context of the practiced sport compete fairly and more allow transparency to the public from both personal and professional life, the researchers aimed to conduct a systematic review of integrity, ethics and well-being in the elite sport. Making a selection of works published between 2006-2016 (from 5 different publications), they analyzed inductively 23 articles that corresponded to the selection criteria established by the authors.

The analysis generated conclusions such as ethics, integrity, sportsmanship and well-being are manifested interdependently at the level of elite sports. At the same time the external expectations placed on elite athletes are not supportive in their lives or realistic (Agnew et al., 2017). It is therefore important to understand what the main ethical values are grounding sports and how are those recognized at the level of international practice. However, when we refer to sport we are considering not only the elite players, but also the amateurs, the professionals of all levels, as individuals who should enjoy their choices and activities in sport, in a safe, moral and ethical environment, with healthy boundaries.

If we consider 1) fairness and integrity, as ethical principles grounding sports, then we may approach those principles integrated by fairness and integrity: fair play (everyone deserves to participate in a fair and just game, adhering to the rules and respecting opponents) (Loland, 2013; Serrano-Durá et al., 2021), anti-doping (prohibiting the use of performance-enhancing drugs to maintain a level playing field and protect athlete health) (Kayser et al., 2020; Henning, 2017), anti-match fixing (preventing manipulation of results for personal gain, upholding the integrity of competition) (Carpenter, 2012; Goh, 2021), but also the transparency and accountability (openness in decision-making and holding individuals and organizations accountable for ethical breaches) (Urdaneta et al., 2021).

Another set of principles that should lead into a moral based action in any sort of sport are those grounded in 2) respect and inclusivity (non-discrimination, anti-abuse and harassment, cultural sensitivity, protecting athlete welfare). At the European, but even international level, discrimination in sports most frequently involves stigmatization based on external characteristics (skin color, body shape and gender), although there are also some variations, as identified in the specialized literature (Proli, et al., 2014; de Groot, 2021).
It is also important to make a clear distinction between deliberate discrimination (in sports clubs, at sports venues, etc.) and the feeling of being discriminated against, which some individuals and communities may experience more strongly than others (foreigners, gays, lesbians, or trans people, etc.). Furthermore, discrimination is very often cumulative (Katsarova, 2021). Through the principle of non-discrimination both individuals and organizations supporting an ethical behavior in sports support the ensuring equal opportunities and treatment for all participants regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other personal characteristics (Martowicz et al., 2023). The inclusivity related on non-discrimination is supported by the promoters of sports and physical activity performed by persons with disabilities, as having a key role in the integration process of people with disabilities into society and have an important contribution to the promotion of equal opportunities between people with and without disabilities in the sporting, educational and social context, is recognized as well (Januário et al., 2024; Winnick & Porretta, 2016). When referring to anti-abuse and harassment principle, we seek on creating a safe and inclusive environment free from physical, verbal, or emotional abuse and harassment (Mountjoy et al., 2016). World organizations are devoted to building a safe sport environment, by developing policies with transparency and availability worldwide (World Abilitysport (nd); U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2022). Other principles related to respect and inclusivity are the cultural sensitivity (respecting diverse cultural backgrounds and values within the sport community) (Gieß-Stüber, 2010) and protecting athlete welfare (prioritizing the physical and mental well-being of athletes, addressing issues like overtraining, burnout, and injury prevention). Related to mental well-being of the athletes, recent findings of Daley et al. (2023) show how “the growing trend toward early sport specialization is associated with increased risk for injury and burnout, both of which have significant implications for mental health”. They consider in their paper the fact that “mental health literacy programs designed to promote awareness, decrease stigma, and encourage help-seeking behaviors can be an effective way to increase resilience and early recognition of those in need” (Daley et al., 2023).

Another group of ethical principles identified in the scientific literature is associated with 3) responsibility and governance (good sportsmanship, responsible leadership, sustainable practices, social responsibility). Good sportsmanship implies for coaches, athletes, and spectators demonstrating positive behavior and promoting fair competition (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006), the National Collegiate Athletic Association defining the sportsmanship as a set of behaviors to be exhibit by the athletes, coaches, officials, administrators and
both fans (including the parents) in an athletic competition. All these behaviors should be grounded in such fundamental values such as respect, fairness, civility, honesty, responsibility (NCAA, 2024; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006). When considering the responsible leadership, literature in the field focuses on leaders that uphold ethical standards and making decisions based on fairness and transparency (Andrews, 2023; Constandt et al., 2020). The responsibility as ethical behavior in leadership is often challenged by different types of ethical infringements both at individual and group level, such as violence, (sexual) abuse, (management) fraud, doping, and match-fixing (Constandt et al., 2020). An ethical leadership in sport might come to support and protect the integrity of sport.

If we consider the Lawson’s (2005) view on sustainable practices in sport, we may refer at minimizing the environmental impact of sports and promoting responsible resource management.

He questions on how sport, exercise, and physical education professionals empower the people they serve and contribute to community development, but also on how the policies, programs, and practices in sport, exercise and physical education contribute to sustainable economic and social development, making them worthwhile governmental investments. He stands for empowerment-oriented and community-based programs in sports, and further practices may contribute to sustainable development in five related areas: 1) human health and well-being across the lifespan; 2) mollify the harms caused by poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group conflict; 3) contribute to human capital development, especially in vulnerable youth; 4) develop collective identities, thereby facilitating collective action; and 5) foster social networks and voluntary associations, which animate civil society in strong democracies (Lawson, 2005).

While approaching social responsibility in sports, Weems et al. (2017) questioned three popularized forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR): (1) diversity, inclusion, and diversity management, (2) environmental responsibility, and (3) health and physical activity-based initiatives. They consider that in a neoliberal context, CSR in sport comes to provide a restricted feedback to social issues, or in the worst case scenario, CSR may be socially irresponsible programs, through initiatives that further permit inequalities and inequities. They also support a neoliberal logic that serves to rationalize and augment sport organizations’ place(s) in society (Weems et al., 2017). Social responsibility implies of using sport as a platform for positive social change and addressing issues like gender equality, environmental protection, and community development.
Conclusion

The connection between sports and ethics is almost suddenly obvious, as sport through its specificities of a play, a set of rules and a social activity implies human interaction, therefore interaction of different moral and ethical values and principles.

Ethical principles are crucial in ensuring that sport is conducted fairly, safely, and respectfully for all participants. During the paper, we referred to series of principles as they were identified in the international scientific literature in the field. However, it is important to understand these principles are not exhaustive, and specific ethical issues may arise within different sports and contexts. It’s important also, for professionals, lay persons interested in sport, organizations of support, to stay informed, engage in open dialogue, and adapt these principles to ensure ethical practices at all levels of sport.

The present paper briefly approached a theoretical analysis of ethical principles in sport, by making a selection of ethical principles which are not exhaustive, but important enough to be considered as start in framing those interested in understanding sport ethical principles in a nutshell.

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