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Problems Of Aggression In Sport

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What do we mean when we say, "He's an aggressive athlete?" Is this a desirable trait? We speak of aggressive salesmen, of aggressive women, of aggressive professionals. Are we complimenting them or are we criticizing them? Violent, aggressive behavior in sport has become a real problem in today's society. Professional sport has provided the model for collegiate, high school, and even pee wee league sport. Is sport just reflecting society's general attitudes toward violence as a way of resolving conflict? Can we expect sport to be different from society in general with regard to aggression and violence?

One cannot read the sports page or view sports on television without acknowledging that violent, aggressive behavior in sport is escalating. The problem appears more severe in team sports. Popular sports magazines have published articles on brutality in football, Basketball and even baseball have both had their share of physical aggression and injury. Ice hockey is another sport that hardly has a game played that does not include some aggressive, violent action. When one hockey player was charged with a felony for his behavior on the ice the sports world exploded. The reaction was that the courts have no right to interfere.

The severity of the problem can be seen in the attitudes of participants. One coach said "We have to police our own." "We do not have to go to court." "I do not think the law can dispense justice in sports," while another said "If they cut down violence too much, people won't come out to watch." "It is a reflection of our society." "People want to see violence."

Physical brutality has now invaded women's sports. The injury rate has increased tremendously with increasing in-

terest and support of women's sports. Last spring at the U.S. Women's Lacrosse tournament many players were walking around with broken noses, facial lacerations, broken or lost teeth, etc. How did sport get to this point? Can we change it? If so, how?

Eysenck (1975), commenting on the so-called "killer instinct" that some say is essential for athletic success, said, "The drive stimuli of the killer instinct are those feelings that you would experience if you hated your opponent and wanted to kill him." "But, killing your opponent is one thing, beating him in tennis another, and the habits appropriate to the former are inappropriate for the latter. In fact, they interfere with it and performance suffers."

John Paul Scott put it another way when he said that one of the first principles of competitive sport is that a person who loses his temper is likely to lose the game either because he loses his judgment or through violation of the rules.

Aggression in sport has not been studied systematically; most of the discussion and writing about it has been based on general work in psychology on aggressive behavior. As a result, the theories of aggression in sport are the same theories that psychologists use for general aggression. The major theories are: (1) aggression is innate or instinctive; (2) the frustration-aggression theory; and (3) aggression is a learned form of behavior. Research has generated more support for the social learning theory of aggression than other theories. This theory also has implication for sport.

Once aggressive responses have been acquired, a number of different conditions and factors operate to ensure their persistence. As long as these acts provide important tangible rewards, the behavior will