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Acceptable Violence

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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There are times when marginally related events converge and raise questions about issues related to sport. Such a convergence occurred in my corner of sportsworld over the past week.

A few days ago there was a dog fight bust near Orlando. There were an estimated 40 men and women in attendance, and over thirty dogs were taken by Animal Rescue. Spectators and participants came from several states to partake in this violent sport. It is safe to say that for most of us this is unacceptable violence and not regarded as a sport. This bust by local authorities reminded us of the horrors of the Michael Vick case and the shock it produced.

As difficult as it may be for many of us to understand, there are people both in the United States and across the world who look on dog fights as sport. The same is true of cock fighting. In the four decades I have lived in the Orlando area the dog fighting and cock fighting communities have thrived despite condemnation by the main stream.

Yesterday at the White House President Obama held a conference on concussions. Over the past few years the discussion of concussions has entered the mainstream in the world of sport, and a sense of urgency has developed around the issue. Football, particularly the National Football League, has attracted the most attention. Increasing numbers of former players have reported cases of early dementia, and high profile cases of suicide have been tied to head injuries.

As was indicated at the White House conference yesterday there is now a national discussion on the issue. It is not limited to the NFL, but also involves the question of the appropriateness of football for young children. Parents are asking if football is an activity in which their children should participate. Others wonder if there is too much violence in this and other sports.

Meanwhile the playoffs of the winter professional sports are coming to a conclusion. Both the NBA and NHL will conclude their championship competition in June. As someone who is a fan of hockey I have been watching a number of games over the past few weeks. It may be just me, but it

appears that the level of violence in this sport has escalated markedly during these playoffs. The marginally legal hits, the rash of cross-checking often to the head, the number of sticks, elbows, and shoulders to the head, all seem to have increased. "Running the goalie" seems to be a normal part of play. As a result players have been taken out of competition but to hear the commentators it simply represents getting the edge and being a man.

Skill levels in the sport are at or near the highest levels in its history and there is little disparity in the quality of the teams. The thing that can separate one team from another is the physical play that too often deteriorates into violent play. The officials seem to have forgotten their whistles and that, in short, means that the NHL has made a decision to legitimate increased violence.

What then constitutes "acceptable violence" in sport? It is easy to find nearly universal agreement that dog fighting involves an unacceptable level of violence. What of football or hockey? Are there levels of acceptable violence? Clearly there are. Both of these are extremely violent games and their appeal to both participants and spectators is to be found in the violence.

The crushing hit in football, the hard check in hockey, are both applauded and inspire admiration. The ability to absorb the violence and to deliver the violence is considered a marker of masculinity. These are games in which aggression is not just a virtue, but in fact a necessity. One of the uses of drugs is to elevate levels of testosterone which in turn leads to more aggression and consequently more violence.

To return then to the question, what constitutes acceptable levels of violence? How are parameters set? Certainly the rules of the game play a role in limiting or expanding physical play and resulting violent play. Equally certain the rules will be violated. So how these rules are enforced and what levels of penalty result from a transgression of the rules is a significant decision.

As we know from watching the more violent sports it is not easy to set the parameters for acceptable play. Nor is it easy to enforce the rules. Medical consequences are part of the gauge for this. Consequences come in both the short-

term and particularly in the case of concussions, in the long-term.

These seem fairly straightforward measurements but calibrating them into the rules is tricky. One problem is that the very essence of some sports is violent, and seeking a limit on violence runs the risk of dampening the appeal of that sport. Another problem is that, even within the medical and scientific community, there is considerable disagreement as to what constitutes the "acceptable."

As has been shown in the recent history of the National Football League and their approach to concussions, the scientific and the medical knowledge is not necessarily followed. Economic interests in such areas as league revenue and league liability can trump knowledge and lead to denial.

I don't know what happened at the White House yesterday other than a raising of the level of awareness, but one would hope that there was some discussion of the meaning and acceptability of violence within both sport and society.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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