

## **The Relationship between Sports and Sportsmanship**

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Sportsmanship does not mean only taking part in sports and playing the game in conformity with the rules prescribed, but also playing the game of life in the spirit imbibed on the playing fields.

A true sportsman is he who observes all those rules in life which he has been taught to observe in games. One who has achieved skill or proficiency in games but does not learn to apply the principles of sports to life in general does not deserve to be called a sportsman.

On the contrary, a man who gives evidence of possessing a sporting spirit in games is still a sportsman. Usually those who play games develop into true sportsmen because their character is moulded by the training they are given on the field.

It implies fair play. Just in games if any player plays foul, the side to which he belongs is penalized; similarly in the bigger game of life one must always be fair in one's dealings with others.

Fairness, honesty, integrity, openness of heart and frankness -these are the qualities that a sportsman must display in life. One should not practice deception, should not bluff, should not cheat others and should indulge in diplomacy or humility. A sportsman never takes undue advantage of the weakness of his adversary nor does he hit below the belt.

The art implies obedience to the leader. In games the players have to obey their captain and yield to him on points on which they are in disagreement with him. They must repose the fullest confidence in him. In life too, a sportsman yields to his superior even if he does not agree with him. Respect for discipline is an essential part of sportsmanship.

Team spirit is another important element of sportsmanship. In games the various players must cooperate with one another if they wish to win a match. Without mutual co-operation success is impossible. Similarly in whatever sphere of life one may be, one must aid and be aided by one's friends if one is a true sportsman.

Sportsmanship consists in working in full harmony with others. In cooperation indeed lies strength. Wherever a common aim binds a number of people together, they must display their sportsmanship by working harmoniously, without friction or mutual jealousy.

Fair play, respect for discipline, recognition of the need for teamwork and cheerfulness even in the event of defeat are thus the dominant marks of a sportsman. Sportsmanship is worthy of admiration

Sports events are essentially social in character. They facilitate the coming together of people from various parts of the country, at a national level, and various parts of the world, at the international level. Sports make people cross cultural barriers and speak a language that is understood by all. The World Sports Congress, held in New Delhi, emphasised that sports could

play a major role in promoting and propagating peace, provided one understood the spirit of global participation and the philosophy of sports.

This philosophy of sports is based on the assumption that a “game will be played in the spirit of the game”. Rules of decency and decorum will on no account be violated by all those related to sports. The spirit of sports is to embody a combination of qualities such as fairness, courtesy, generosity, grace and decency or in one word ‘sportsmanship’.

Sports does not simply involve players, spectators, sports authorities, media, sponsors, in fact each and every group or faction that is even remotely associated with sports is a fundamental part of an event. And all of them, then, are expected to maintain a code of conduct and nurture the sporting spirit.

Sportsmanship is the soul or essence of sports. It is a mental or psychological altitude that arouses a sense of fair play. Unless this psychological set-up is maintained, sports would become a testing ground or a show of mere physical prowess and virility. Sports sans sportsmanship is a war, a combat, where winning is an end in itself. If sports encourages the development of a fine character, sports sans sportsmanship encourages outbursts of foul and animal instincts.

When Roman satirist Horace commented around 2,000 years ago—“Sports begets tumultuous strife and wrath, and wrath begets fierce quarrels”—he probably meant sports devoid of sportive spirit. George Orwell, in the modern context, remarked: “Serious sports has nothing to do with fair play.

It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence, in other words, it is war minus the shooting.”

Violence has always remained a part and parcel of sports. The legendary sporting event where slaves were thrown in the ring to fight hungry lions for the amusement of the Roman emperors are not something very different from the boxing matches where two adults thrash each other’s head into pulp.

The nature of spectator involvement is also probably the same. Violence, however, in the modern context is the result of the solid perversion of the desire to win. Killer instinct is, no doubt, a prerequisite to victory but this instinct has unfortunately become negative, intolerant, unthinking and destructive.

A bowler whose delivery is intended to hurt the batsman certainly embodies the negative killer instinct. The famous cricketer, Dennis Lillees’ remark —“I want to see blood splattered on the pitch”—is an example of the manifestation of a violent spirit that will accept no defeat.

For most players today, sportsmanship has secondary importance. Fairness, generosity, courtesy and decorum have given way to doping, bribing, ball tempering in the case of cricket, widespread drug use, undignified behaviour and abusive and condescending attitude towards fellow players.

A game today is not played in the spirit of the game. In order to attain hitherto unattained standards of excellence, the players sometimes resort to un-gentlemanly, though not always unlawful behaviour. The nobility of a game has been lost, as victory is all that matters and participation in an event is not enough.

A game has become a cut-throat competition and Participants from other countries are not fellow sportsmen but rivals. A performance these days does not bring joy; only’ success does. And if a

player attaches so much significance to victory can he at the same time embody the real spirit of sports?

The highly ungraceful and antagonistic behaviour of contending teams towards each other can be explained in terms of their nationalist attitudes. Sudhanshu Shekhar Roy writes in Sports for Global Peace that “with advancement in all fields, the economic restructuring and the growth of regionalism, sports remain the major instrument to promote loyalty and identity”.

Sports is a vital field which manifests the development of a country and sportsman, and countrymen tend to derive self-assurance and national pride from victory. The sentiment is, no doubt, a noble one and if it motivates a player to achieve standards, it should be encouraged. However, nationalism in sports has taken an ugly dimension.

Most players regard themselves as countries personified and the playground as a “Kuruksheetra” where the esteem and honour of their motherland has to be kept high. However, if the patriotic sentiments of the players move towards their extreme, the game becomes a little less than a war between the two nations. Extreme nationality (or the regionality, if the game is on national level) aggravates competitive sentiments.

A similar jingoistic fervour grips the spectators. Desmond Morris in his book *The Soccer Tribe* reflects on the emotions that lead to a heightening of bonds between people and allow for a sense of collective involvement.

Spectators who are part of the crowd derive energy to relieve their ecstasy or agony. A supportive home crowd can actually inspire and elevate the players to victory. Leander Paes’s performance in Davis cup and India’s success over Pakistan in the quarter-finals of Wills World cup at Bangalore would testify to this fact.

However, the reverse is also true. Volatile crowds can make the otherwise indefatigable champions lose simply because they could not perform their best in hostile conditions. Goran Ivanisevic, the Croatian tennis player, described the passionate crowds’ flag-waving as—“It was like playing in a zoo. They were screaming for everything.”

Nationalism in sports is nothing new. Even nations express their ideological stand through sports. In the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Hitler attempted to prove the supremacy of the Aryan race.

Moscow Olympics were boycotted by the US and its allies as a protest against Soviet troops taking up position in Afghanistan. The next Los Angeles Olympics were boycotted by the Soviet Union as a retaliatory measure. South Africa was banned from participating in the Olympics for 32 years because of its apartheid policies.

One might succeed in giving a rational and sufficing explanation for such moves by nations but the point is that it hinders the fostering of sportsmanship, in all its connotations.

Boycott of games or matches because of ideological differences presupposes that sports events are nothing but wars. Ironically, the participation of countries in sports events has failed to increase international fraternity. Latin American countries have virtually gone to war over a football match.

A person, who is genuinely interested in sports, would thoroughly enjoy a game, irrespective of who is playing. Having preferences for a particular player or a team is not unsportsmanlike. But basing one’s preferences purely on nationalist grounds and letting those preferences mar a match because of highly unruly behaviour would amount to ungamed spirit.

A good shot—whether played by a Tendulkar or a Jayasurya should evoke the same response. Ideally, sportsmanship allows for an honest appreciation of sports irrespective of victory or defeat (of home team or of other favourites).

However, the attainment of this ideal state of maturity is almost impossibility because most people have a tendency to watch only those events in which their own country is participating. However, the crowd can at least be expected to let the match proceed without any violent disruptions and refrain from venting their anger towards the opponent team.

The un-gamely attitude of both players and spectators can possibly be explained in terms of modern psyche of an individual. Life for most human beings today is a sort of competition where each one struggles to win. Every one cannot emerge victorious; however, the insatiable greed for victory remains.

For the spectators, the victory of one team (mostly their favourites) gives them the vicarious pleasure of winning. They invest in the event not just in terms of money and time but also emotions.

And when they make such a huge investment, they expect similar returns, sometimes unreasonably. A victory leaves them euphoric while defeat makes them utterly depressed leading to hysterical responses which may be highly in disciplined and undignified. Victory for them provides satisfaction of collective ego and a triumph over destiny.

Strike and quarrels during matches have become ubiquitous whether it is a match on the street between children or a tournament at the school\college\district level or a national\international sports event; it is marked by fights and serious disagreements.

The unyielding spirit to win and only win, at whatsoever cost, reflects the ethos of a highly insensitive and competitive society. The players exist in society where defeat is not acceptable, where losers deserve no sympathy.

The pressure on them to win, by hook or by crook, is so great that the players succumb to unfair and aggressive means. They have been hailed as celebrities by the media and have to keep up their name and fame.

Is it possible for them in such circumstances, with pressure to perform better from all sides, to abstain themselves from unfair means? Degeneration of sportsmanship is also a part of the process of materialisation that a society goes through.

Sports heroes are literally showered with money and advertisement contracts. Sponsorships tempt players to perform better and give their best but the true sporting spirit is pushed to the edge. It is overshadowed by obsession to make money.

Sports administration, commercial sponsors and the media are equally responsible for emotional flare-ups in the players and the spectators. All of them play a dual role.

They provide the much-needed facilities and encouragement to the sportsmen but have also created nightmares for them. Sponsorship and money from commercial houses ensure the availability of modern facilities for the players.

They have helped—although •indirectly—provide a professional touch to sports. But the question is—do they promote a healthy sporting spirit and a healthy sports-loving nation.

Do not the corporate sponsors, with the ulterior motive of selling their products, popularise or hype up a forthcoming sports events through advertisements and manipulate public behaviour.

The media's extensive coverage of sports events has made them mega events. It makes sports person's celebrities in a day and creates a false image of their invincibility. The players become a victim of their image and cannot sustain the burden of media attention for long.

Most of these players are young, and more often than not, exaggerated hero worship by the media and people makes them overconfident and brash. It also builds up an insurmountable pressure on them to give a consistently good performance, which is an extremely unreasonable demand.

It has been said that it is only in defeat that a human being reveals himself or herself. Losing a game creates an opportunity to show real sportsmanship—grace, dignity, generosity, resilience and nobility. Unfortunately, the players and spectators need to realise that lessons are to be learnt from defeat. After all, in any game one side has to win and the other has to lose.

#### Reference

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