Ethics of Trash Talking in Soccer*

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This study investigated trash talk among soccer players, focusing on whether it actually disturbed playing performance and whether the ability to ignore such trash talk was an asset to the game. The ‘‘Laws of the Game’’ of soccer stipulate that any player who uses ‘‘offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures’’ should be dismissed from the field. Therefore, any penalty imposed on players for such behavior can be interpreted as sanctions for prohibited act.

Furthermore, any game in which offensive or insulting remark are used was considered by reference to Kawatani’s opinion about excellence and ‘‘failed athletic contest’’. When a referee penalizes a player appropriately for such behavior, it is suggested that the game has not ‘‘failed’’. On the other hand, as such behavior is often difficult for a referee to notice, an appropriate penalty is sometimes not administered. Therefore, it is suggested that an offensive or insulting remark is an act that indirectly destroys the ethos of a game. I conclude that the ability to ignore trash talk is not an asset to the game in principle, but that such ability is practically necessary.

Keywords: violence, trash talk, excellence, failed athletic contest

1. Introduction

During sports contests, the human body may be subjected to stresses that would not be permissible during daily life, such as those experienced during boxing or rugby. In daily life, actions such as blows or bodily impact are treated as criminal or injurious assaults, whereas in boxing matches or rugby competitions they are not considered illegal (Maeda, 1999, pp.56-63). Despite this paradox, violence in sports is considered to be a problem in some instances. In the field of sport philosophy, the rights and wrongs of boxing have been widely discussed (Dixon, 2001; Kawatani, 2005; Lewandowski, 2007; Parry, 1998; Schneider and Butcher, 2001; Simon, 1991), and in baseball the issue of pitcher retaliation in the form of ‘‘beaning’’, where a player’s body is directly struck by the ball, has also been considered (Dixon, 2010; McAleer, 2009; Omine et al., 2013a, 2013b; Weimer, 2012). However, with regard to the problem of verbal attacks on players, it appears that there have been few opportunities for discussion.

A background factor related to the head-butting inflicted by Zidane in the FIFA World Cup Final in 2006 was an argument with Materazzi, a player on the opposing team (Nihei, 2006). FIFA imposed fines and suspension on both players, although the investigation had concluded that race-baiting had not occurred. Materazzi had conceded that although his defamatory abuse had been regrettable, many players say crueler things (‘‘Soccer’’, 2006).

Verbal abuse can provoke a direct attack on another player, or cause more harm than a direct physical attack. It can be said that in order to resolve the problem of violence in sports, it is necessary to discuss not only physical attacks, but also verbal attacks. During athletic contests, spectators also engage in verbal attacks such as heckling or booing. Such verbal attacks by spectators will be dealt with in another study. However, the scope of the present study is limited to verbal abuse*1 by one player against another. I will begin by summarizing previous research on the morality of verbal attacks by players during sports contests, in order to clarify the points that are in dispute.
2. Study of previous research

Fraleigh (1984) argued that, for the following reasons, it is necessary to prevent defamatory statements intended to insult or disparage another player’s character, intellect, physique, genealogy, or athleticism. Firstly, insults can destabilize the emotions of participants so that their athletic performance is compromised, and thus such actions are intrinsically unfair (Fraleigh, 1984, p.118) because they represent qualities that are not mutually viewed as skills that should be tested in an athletic contest, which contradicts the principle of equal opportunity. Secondly, the use of insults degrades mutual respect between participants. Thirdly, insults should be regarded as injurious, and therefore avoided in line with the general universal principle of “do no harm.” Fourthly, insults hinder an accurate understanding of the relative abilities of players (Fraleigh, 1984, p.119).

Summers (2007) has discussed the issue of verbal abuse in professional sports, arguing that in this context, the use of any means outside the legitimate range in order to gain victory is disgraceful (Summers, 2007, p.73). He points out that the use of verbal abuse to gain a competitive advantage may not necessarily be insulting (Summers, 2007, p.74), the rationale being that it is occasionally motivated by respect for the skills of the opponent. When two players of equal athletic skill are competing, verbal abuse may be motivated by a conscious intention to test the opponent’s power of concentration. He concluded that verbal abuse to gain a competitive advantage may be regarded as an extraneous but marginal skill, and may even be an appropriate skill in some instances.

Dixon (2007) has argued that the ability to deliver verbal abuse and/or to remain unaffected by it are unrelated to athletic excellence as measured by athletic contests, and therefore cannot be vindicated. Dixon (2008) has also interpreted the mental toughness that is essential for athletic excellence as the ability to best display one’s own skills or the ability to remain calm during an athletic contest played under pressure. He concludes that when athletes participate in sports, verbal abuse is unconnected to the physical, tactical, and mental skills that the participants have agreed to test, and that therefore it is impossible to condone it (Dixon, 2008, p.95).

The previous research described above clearly shows that one point of dispute is whether or not the ability to disrupt the performance of an opponent by verbal abuse, or the ability to remain unaffected by it, should be included as an element of athletic excellence. As Fraleigh has pointed out, this issue is related to clarifying whether the ability to disrupt the performance of an opponent by verbal abuse, or the ability to remain unaffected by it, are “skills” that the participants have agreed to test through competition. If it is tentatively assumed that these represent one aspect of athletic excellence, then verbal abuse may not be viewed as an action that disrespects an opponent, and is not equivalent to an insult. As pointed out by Summers, verbal abuse may be regarded as a “marginal skill” in some instances.

To examine the above issue, it is necessary to review the various competition rules related to verbal abuse. The next section examines how penalties for verbal abuse are stipulated, and how penalties ought to be interpreted. It also discusses the issue of excellence (superiority) in athletic contests in terms of the rights and wrongs of verbal abuse. As this paper began by referring to the Zidane head-butting incident, the competition rules of soccer (Laws of the Game) will be examined initially.

3. Prohibition of malicious slander among players in Laws of the Game

All football matches conducted under FIFA rules, continental leagues linked to FIFA, and other associations affiliated to FIFA are covered by the Laws of the Game (Japan Football Association, online). The Laws of the Game stipulate that any player “using offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures” will be sent off. The Laws of the Game clearly prohibit directing offensive or insulting language at any player of an opposing team, and any such behavior can be regarded as a deliberate infraction of the rules. The action of sending off a player who has used offensive or insulting behavior is, with reference to Simon (1991), not merely an option, but can be interpreted as a sanction for a prohibited act. When viewed from the perspective of competition rules, the use of offensive or insulting language in soccer cannot be interpreted as an essential skill, or even a marginal skill; such actions are clearly not permissible under any circumstances.
In reality, however, some teams may win matches using offensive or insulting language. Is it possible to view such a team as the stronger or superior one, or can it be considered that such matches fail to decide which of the teams is superior? These points will be addressed in the next section.

4. Analysis of athletic contests in which offensive or insulting language is used

In the field of sport philosophy, there have been various attempts to examine the issue of superiority in athletic contests, and the concept of “failed athletic contests” (Dixon, 1999; Hämäläinen, 2014;, Kawatani, 2012, 2013; Kreider, 2011). Below, with reference to the views of Kawatani (2012, 2013), who conducted perhaps the most refined analysis, we consider athletic contests in which offensive or insulting language is used.

4.1. Athletic superiority and “failed athletic contests” with reference to Kawatani

Kawatani (2012) discusses athletic superiority with criticism of Dixon (1999) as his starting point. Dixon asserts that “failed athletic contests”, i.e. those that fail to decide athletic superiority, do occur in competitive sports*4 (Dixon, 1999, p.10). Athletic contests fail as a result of errors made by referees, cheating by players*5, gamesmanship (use of verbal abuse, strategic fouls, etc.), and even bad luck. Dixon explains that because winning is a consequence of the above factors, which are not related to athletic superiority, winning is not the most important factor in terms of athletic superiority. He concludes that it is necessary to revise our view of athletic superiority, not only from the viewpoint of simply winning or losing athletic contests, but also from an intuitive or mundane perspective (Dixon, 1999, pp.18-19)*6. In Dixon’s view, “failed athletic contests” are all those in which the outcome is decided through refereeing errors, bad luck, or other factors that the players cannot control.

However, Kawatani pointed out that as long as strength is dependent on mundane or intuitive concepts, as Dixon states, it would never be possible to decide strength according to the outcome of an athletic contest (Kawatani, 2012, p.68). Even if an athletic contest were not held, the conclusion would be the same, and by Dixon’s argument, an athletic contest as a tool would be nothing more than a process that affirms intuition (Kawatani, 2012, p.69). Kawatani asserted that athletic contests have been introduced as tools to objectively demonstrate strength simply because it is impossible to understand which is stronger based only on intuition. Strength is interpreted not as something that actually exists before an athletic contest, but something that is created through the athletic contest itself (Kawatani, 2012, p.71).

On the other hand, Kawatani pointed out that as long as there are cases where the outcome is not correctly decided, there will also be cases where strength is not correctly decided (Kawatani, 2012, p.72). These would be cases where the rules deciding outcome are flawed, including refereeing errors. He considered that in all cases where the outcome is decided correctly according to the rules, the victor ought to be considered the stronger, and that a correct conclusion based on the rules governing winning and losing is a necessary and sufficient condition for deciding strength*7.

Kawatani (2013) has also pointed out that an athletic contest may not be forfeited because players break the rules, but that a refereeing error in enforcing the rules—when a referee turns a blind eye to a rule-breaking player or makes an incorrect decision*8—endangers the institutional integrity of the contest. If the refereeing error is a minor one, the institutional integrity of the contest may not be impacted, whereas in cases where a refereeing error decisively reverses the outcome, the integrity of the contest will naturally be in doubt (Kawatani, 2013, p.36). Overall, according to Kawatani, any refereeing error that reverses the outcome results in a failed athletic contest.

Kawatani also discussed “failed athletic contests” from the perspective of the contest ethos (intrinsic goal), which holds that superiority is decided in terms of victory or defeat (Kawakami, 2013, pp.37-38). He considered that a “failed athletic contest” could result if the ethos is not realized, even if the outcome was decided after players had adhered to the rules and in the absence of any refereeing errors (Kawatani, 2013, p.37)*9. Similarly to Kreider (2011), he stated that the only conditions required for an athletic contest to be considered valid would be for the players to adhere to the rules and for the rules to function effectively, although in order to realize the contest ethos, players must be
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committed to winning (Kawatani, 2013, p.38).

I would now like to consider the issue of athletic contests in which offensive or insulting language is used, with reference to Kawatani’s views.

4.2. Use of offensive or insulting language resulting in a “failed athletic contest”

With reference to Kawatani’s argument, if a referee appropriately penalizes offensive or insulting language under the rules, a “failed athletic contest” cannot occur. However, there have been cases in the World Cup or other professional soccer matches where players employ verbal abuse covertly out of earshot of the referee. As a result, they are not appropriately penalized, and therefore this can be regarded as a refereeing error. The offensive verbal exchange between Zidane and Materazzi was not appropriately penalized. In soccer matches that are not World Cup games or those that are played at a lower professional level, the standard of refereeing is likely not as high, and therefore it can be concluded that players often use offensive or insulting language with impunity.

Kawatani has pointed out that, if a refereeing error is minor, the institutional integrity of the match is unaffected, whereas if a decisive refereeing error reverses the outcome, then the institutional integrity of the match is dubious. Nevertheless, if offensive or insulting language has been overlooked and not appropriately penalized, then there are grounds for considering that the refereeing error was not minor. It is assumed that a player subjected to verbal abuse might lose his composure and commit a clear mistake that allows an opposing player to take the ball and score a point, thus deciding the outcome. Similarly, a similar situation might cause a player to miss a goal-scoring chance. Such cases can be defined as areas where refereeing errors could be decisive in reversing the outcome of a match, and would not be minor. As pointed out above, sending off a player who has used offensive or insulting language is justified, and such offensive behavior ought to be completely eliminated from soccer games. However, if such acts are overlooked by the referee and not appropriately penalized, then they can have a great impact on the outcome.

In the Zidane and Materazzi case, the failure of the referee to penalize the exchange of verbal abuse between the two players, and the sending-off of Zidane for head-butting his opponent, were undoubtedly refereeing errors that seriously impacted the outcome of the game. However, it is extremely difficult for referees to appropriately penalize the use of abusive language if it is done covertly. Therefore, in reality, a not inconceivable number of football games can be regarded as “failed athletic contests” resulting from non-minor refereeing errors. In order to appropriately penalize offensive or insulting language, increasing the number of referees or attaching microphones to all players to monitor their speech would be necessary, but this would be difficult to implement in practice. If athletic excellence is based on the outcome of a game, then the use of offensive language is an action that can cause “failed athletic contests” if the refereeing is not rigorous, and this indirectly disrupts the ethos of athletic competition.

It is difficult for referees to prevent the use of offensive language by players. If players become aware of this difficulty, then it becomes impossible to decide superiority in an atmosphere of fair competition if they choose to exploit the opportunity of using such language. Given that referees find it difficult to detect verbal abuse, in practice players need to avoid becoming distracted by it any more than is necessary. Although the ability to remain unaffected by verbal abuse is not a measure of superiority as defined by competition rules, it has to be regarded as necessary.

5. Conclusion and future challenges

This study has focused on abusive verbal exchanges between soccer players, in order to examine the issue of whether or not such behavior disrupts the performance of opposing players, and whether the ability to remain unaffected by it can be regarded as one aspect of athletic excellence. The study was limited to soccer matches, and began by examining the competition regulations related to verbal abuse in the sport. The Laws of the Game state that any player who uses “offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures” should be sent off, and this penalty can be viewed as a sanction for a prohibited act. The use of offensive or insulting language in matches was considered with reference to Kawakami’s opinions on excellence or “failed athletic contests”, and it was concluded that if a referee appropriately penalizes the use of offen-
sive language, then the game would not become such a “failed” contest. However, because offensive language is an offence that is difficult to detect, it often occurs with impunity, thereby detracting from the ethos of an athletic contest, in which superiority is decided on the basis of outcome. Because verbal abuse by players can result in a “failed athletic contest”, the evidence suggests that although remaining unaffected by such abuse is not a measure of the superiority that is in contention, in reality it is an ability that is considered necessary*11.

Although this study was based on the premise that verbal attacks can provoke direct physical attacks on players, there are also cases where a verbal attack is provoked by direct physical contact. In the case of Zidane and Materazzi, the argument was preceded by physical contact in the form of one player pulling the other's uniform (“Soccer”, 2006). During the Soccer World Cup held in Brazil in 2014, there were verbal disputes between players resulting from such behavior or more violent physical contact. Some players continued to make violent physical contact with other players and commit fouls while avoiding detection by the referees. Future studies will need to examine whether the use of offensive language is appropriate in order to maintain the fairness of athletic contests, or for self-protection.

Notes

*1 In North America, verbal attacks by players on members of opposing teams in order to gain a competitive advantage are generally referred to as “trash talking” (Dixon, 2007, p.96).

*2 In previous research, the words superiority and excellence have been used as synonyms. The same rule will be applied in this paper.

*3 Simon divides the roles of penalties in athletic contests as “sanctions for prohibited acts” and as “prices for options” (Simon, 1991, p.48). Simon argues that a sanction for a deliberate foul committed to stop the clock in basketball and the sanction for the unplayable rule in golf are “prices for options” (Simon, 1991, pp.48-49).

*4 Dixon understands the central purpose of competitive sports to be presenting a comparison in order to decide which team or which player is superior (Dixon, 1999, p.10).

*5 With reference to Fraleigh’s rules, “cheating” is a deliberate action that contravenes an appropriate interpretation of rules shared by participants in an athletic contest, and is an effort to gain an advantage for oneself or for one’s own team members (Fraleigh, 2003, p.168). It is also an action undertaken to avoid being discovered in order to avoid being penalized.

*6 Dixon’s opinion about “failed athletic contests” is a consequence of the principle that a person bears moral responsibility only for that which the person can control, but is not responsible for the results of actions which were not intended and could not be predicted (Dixon, 1999, p.23). For Dixon, actions that are the object of moral evaluations are actions based on deliberate intent.

*7 However, Kawatani asserts the view that strength is not equated with and restored completely with winning, and that winning is the only thing that can represent and symbolize strength in sports, but is nothing more than representation and symbolization (Kawatani, 2012, p.73). In sports, the outcome decides strength at the same time as it creates surpluses and differences that cannot be fully unified. He states that the essence is that which is inversely hypothesized assuming that these surpluses and differences are actual strengths (Kawatani, 2012, p.74).

*8 In soccer matches, there are cases where referees deliberately refrain from penalizing a foul committed by a team when its opposing team has a decisive chance to score a goal. Such cases are not refereeing errors. The reason is that the Laws of the Game stipulate that when a referee predicts that the fouled team will gain an advantage by being permitted to continue play, a penalty must not be applied (Japan Football Association, online).

*9 As an example of a type of athletic contest that does not realize the ethos regardless of the fact that a valid athletic contest is established because no refereeing error has occurred and the players have adhered to the rules, he cites “fixed contests” (Kawatani, 2013, p.37).

*10 Since the research by Kawatani, “failed athletic contests” have been analyzed by Hämääläinen (2014), who states that when the three standards of athletic superiority are in conflict, the result is a “failed athletic contest.” These three standards are “a superior display of athletic skill”, “the ability to meet a presulatory goal using lusory means”, and “the achievement of a better formal result than one’s opponent”. Hämääläinen asserts that by applying these three standards, it is possible to demonstrate correct athletic superiority over a wider range, but he points out that “superior display of athletic skill” is a complex standard, and the one most open to interpretation among the three. In the final analysis, it is presumed that with reference to Kawatani, “how to measure a superior display of athletic skill” comes down to the outcome of an athletic contest. If soccer is taken as an example, a “superior display of athletic skill” would mean scoring more goals than the opposing team, and could be defined as “the achievement of a better formal result than one’s opponent.” Therefore, it can be regarded as a standard for analysis of whether an athletic contest has “failed”, but leaves certain problems unresolved.

*11 This study proposes changes to the present rules of soccer, and without questioning the appropriateness of the rules themselves, considers them to be based solely on the present rules (Laws of the Game). This point is limited to a discussion of the rights and wrongs of verbal abuse.

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