The Moral Dimension of Fair Play in High-Performance Sport

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Abstract

Within the declaration attached to the conclusions of the European Council of December 2000, the main characteristics of sports as well as its social role in Europe were stated. Following the statement, by a series of decisions issued at the Union’s level, the European Commission committed itself to more efficiently preventing and combating violence in sports. Despite the security measures prescribed by the European Commission, sports faces further threats and challenges within the European society, such as business pressure, exploitation of young athletes, doping, racism, violence and corruption. In the present paper, we intend to highlight the role and the moral dimension of fair play, in spite of all acts of violence and discrimination still occurring in some competition venues or during some major sports events. As a value of ethics, fair play remains one of the most important sport virtues generated ever and manifests itself during sports events, leading to exceptional behaviour which patterns its specific essence. The present paper assesses a series of behaviours in Olympic athletes who proved an exemplary spirit and fair play while participating in the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

Keywords: fair play; high-performance sport; preventing and combating violence;

1. Background

Sport – one of man’s creations for a personal use – has got a millennial history; it has lasted over time due to its continuous unfolding concomitant with the faithful preservation of its traditions through history. In virtue of its practising forms, it develops the taste and sensitivity to beauty, thus becoming a part of the domain of
aesthetics, as well. It expresses a modus vivendi for those who dedicate their entire lives to sports; it is a manner of playing for children and a way of maintaining and gaining health. In the summary, all these topics are relevantly expressed within the notion of Fair Play (Costoiu, 2010).

According to the Declaration on Sport, Tolerance and Fair Play (1996), sport is a vital area of education, particularly for young people (Council of Europe, 1996). Due to its special human value, as a generator of attitudes which may ennoble the interaction between individuals by eliminating any type of discrimination, fair play has succeeded in transcending by far the boundaries of a plain activity or of the social subsystem of physical education and sport, as it is approaching all fields of social activity; therefore it has gradually earned a special place within the other social subsystems, as well, including the field of ethics (Bâtlan, 2008). A sense of fair play in sport depends on equal opportunities in both competitive and leisure sport (International Fair Play Committee, 2007, p.6). In this sense, that leisure sport or recreational sport can be summarised in terms of theoretical operators or as a common vocabulary concept as representing activities carried out systematically, with pleasure and awareness of the expected benefits, such as: regeneration of the work potential, in terms of restoring the work capacity, the metabolic balance, the creative efficiency and skills; improvement, maintenance or enhancement of health, appearance and gestures (look); attainment of physical and psychological comfort, of pleasure in its broadest sense, of hobby or lifestyle (Gagea et al., 2010).

In order to facilitate fair play in sport, several aspects have to be considered in practice, inter alia: performance and achievement – as in sporting competition fair play means doing your best and continually improving on your performance within the rules; equal opportunities – as fair play means observing and promoting the fundamental principles of this idea in sport; health – as fair play means guaranteeing the health of fellow players as well as one's own health in sport and also generating well-being sport.

It is a fact that sport has an important moral and social role that completes its dimensions. Of those mentioned before, we believe that sports activity and competitions are able to clarify major moral aspects in practicing sports at a high level, namely: ethics and fair play, the moral character of competitors, self-respect and esteem for teammates and opponents, for the laws of the game.

2. Material and method

We approached an ascertaining-interpretive type of research. Therefore, we used conventional methods of study, such as documentation, casuistic and statistical analysis, analogy and similarity, etc. The fact that the term "fair play" expanded its area of use in other fields, more or less related to high-performance sports, is due to its moral and spiritual dimensions, as well as to its extremely simple management of awareness-raising. Fair play rules do not contradict with, but are similar to natural customs of respect, camaraderie, solidarity, mutual assistance, etc., required by civilized cohabitation and religious dogmas.

The practicality of the present paper refers to the systematic analysis of documents and official writings referring to policies for promoting moral values at the level of the decision-making forums. In this context, a series of documents issued at the European Union's level as well as on a national level have been analysed with regard to the promotion of pure sport and the decrease of violence and gender or racial discrimination in competitive sports. The essay is focused on over fifteen such documents highlighting the joint effort made by all parties involved – from world organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee, UNESCO, UNOSDP to spectators, volunteers, etc.

2.1. Purpose

Mainly, the purpose of the paper is to highlight the role and importance of promoting consistent policies to prevent and combat violence and lack of fair play in high-performance sport. At the same time, we seek to identify those moral dimensions of the concept of fair play in high-performance sport, which can be easily
apprceived and effectively used in other fields. The moral dimension of fair play, along with other affective and rational dimensions or attributes of traditional or cultural practices, etc., can be efficiently used in the management of human resources, in public relations, in the operative leadership of organized groups and even within the educational process.

2.2. Objectives

In connection with the study of literature and the documentation, we aimed to identify the convergent moral characteristics of the notion of fair play and to take a critical stance on redundant attributes or divergent variations of meaning. The paper also brings into focus a series of effective and welcome initiatives, implemented on several levels and meant to inform and to enlighten respectively, along with a multitude of measures, proposals and arguments included. We believe that these campaigns, associated with examples of individual behaviours reflecting a loyal consent to compliance with the rules, are a contribution to raising the awareness about fair play and thus coping with an increasing number of negative attitudes in sports.

At the same time, we reiterate an essential argument for the modern sports’ objectives: fair play is not only about abiding by the rules; it actually expresses the spirit of sports and imposes a way of acting and reacting according to the inner mindset.

3. European policies concerning the fight against violence in sport

As mentioned in the White Paper on Sport, sport is facing dangers and challenges which are new in the European society, such as commercial pressure, exploiting of young sportsmen, doping, racism, violence, corruption and money laundering. One of the most frequent and serious concerns noted among sportspeople is doping - a widespread phenomenon, practised at unprecedented levels; a real threat to the sports done all over the world. On that note, the policy of the European Commission provides that the trafficking of illegal doping substances has to be treated with the same rigorousness and seriousness as the trade of illegal drugs.

In Romania, the National Anti-Doping Agency (2012) admits the existence of this problem and establishes the strategy and the objectives according to the provisions of the Council of Europe and to the World Anti-doping Code, whose main objectives refer to: protecting the fundamental right of sportsmen to participate in a sport activity without doping and promoting health, fairness and equal opportunities for athletes from all sports and from all over the world; promoting the national and international harmonisation of anti-doping programs, including coordinated and efficient measures to be taken for the detection, fight against and prevention of doping in all sports.

The European anti-discrimination legislation is one of the most extensive in the world (Eurobarometer reports, 2012). In this regard, the European Commission provides financial support to all the initiatives aiming at combating violence and intolerance in sport. The projects financed by the Commission therefore sustain at least two areas of interest, namely the prevention and countering of violence and intolerance in sport, on one hand, and the promotion of some innovative approaches in order to consolidate the organization and management of sports within Europe, on the other hand. The financing decision endorses projects which take into account educational labs for young European supporters, an endeavour targeting at the education of youth in the sense of combating violence in sports. There are nine countries involved in this project, among which Romania is one full member. Another project aims at preventing and countering sexualized violence in sports and it concerns the setup of a network of experts and organizations, in order to eradicate aggressive manners with sexual connotation in the field of sport activity. This initiative benefits from assistance by ten European countries, with a financial support amounting to 200,000.00 Euros. Further on, within the same area of interest, there is funding granted for a project on preventing and fighting homophobic violence and intolerance in sport. Its main objective consists in the development of a transnational network engaged in countering homophobic discrimination in sports and the
countries involved are Germany, France, Hungary, Sierra Leone and Great Britain, as well as a European organization. In addition to that, in view of a new approach to organizing sport in Europe, there are subsidies granted to further programs promoting Sport for Good Governance, as well as Good Governance in Grassroots Sport – a project involving Romania as well and aiming at increasing the organizational capacity, particularly at the grassroots sport association level, while focusing on transparency and accountability. Likewise, the topics of other financed ventures include the European Rugby League Governance Foundation Project; Improving Football Governance through Supporter Involvement and Community Ownership, etc (European Commission, 2011).

Both the good intentions of the European Commission and the research scientists’ concerns about combating violence and intolerance in sport are prevalently residing in methods to impress, such as imposing more and more severe sanctions against perpetrators of such acts. We also found a tendency to decrease the adverse effects of hooliganism; as spectators, supporters and media are holding them up to opprobrium. We believe that the phenomenon of proliferation of violence and intolerance can be countered effectively by laying the focus on the moral component of fair play, while combining punitive approaches with educational practices or medium- and long-term investments.

3.1. Fair Play at the London Olympics Games, the 30th Edition

Fair play is the expression of a noble human attitude that denotes a feeling of deep respect projected in one’s outward actions and behaviour towards oneself and others (society, environment, etc.). It describes an essential human virtue that must define all interpersonal relationships. After its official recognition by UNESCO in 1963, the International Fair Play Committee started awarding different prizes to athletes showing an outstanding fair play and ethical behaviour at sport events. According to some specialists, UNESCO also recognizes truly outstanding personalities by naming them as Champions for Sport, like Formula One World Champion Michael Schumacher, football legend Pelé, and the Olympic Champion in pole-vaulting Serghiy Bubka (Bogyay, 2012). Finally yet importantly, following the samples of sportsmanship displayed at the recent 2012 Olympic Games in London, there were special fair play prizes awarded to the American decathletes Ashton Eaton and Curtis Beach for proving emblematic spirit while competing. At the same edition of the Summer Olympics, the Korean fencer Shin A Lam chose to protest in an exemplary manner on the fencing strip against the wrong decision taken by the referees.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

According to some authors, in qualitative terms, the correlations found between variables of fair play in competition, general fair play and fair play in society point to the fact that athletes who exhibit a fair play behaviour in competition will manifest the same type of behaviour in social life (Popescu & Masari, 2011).

Despite of being a complex notion, fair play can be explained, understood, educated and relatively simply made aware of; it actually underpins all of sport. Those who circumvent the fair play in sport seem to do it either out of ignorance of rules and regulations, which is not an acceptable excuse, or they do it with awareness; out of interest or of moral vices. The extension of the concept of fair play, whose origin lies in (sports) competition, in other fields, more or less connected with high-performance sport, calls just upon this dimension of morality. Circumvention of fair play, in this case, means breaking the rules and customs of civilized social coexistence, education, self-control or of traditional behaviour standards and religious dogmas. In our ascertaining-interpretive approach, we identified a consensus on the moral dimension of fair play. This agreement covers both the psychic balance of aspiration and expectation, and the behavioural pattern expressed in terms of respect (self-respect, respect shown to the others, the biotope and habitat), mutual assistance, solidarity, loyalty and, as a general rule, of a honest way of living. On the other hand, we have found that mentioning the circumstances of compliance with the rules and practices, within training sessions, competitions, daily life, etc., as specific forms of fair play,
seems to be redundant. Fair play must be respected everywhere and at any time. We also found that the term "fair play" is sometimes used abusively, without any logical basis, for market manipulation – within some product and service names, titles of managerial rights, for environmental purposes etc. Thus, sport comes up as a humanitarian activity attracting masses, as a presentation of policies and ideologies, with its meaning corrupted and commercialized. Even the Olympics, considered as the essence and a show place of sports, are witnessed to be turned into financial merchandise, with the Olympic idea ignored (Goral, 2008).

Sport competition is not an abstract term; it is felt, lived, internalised and projected by real individuals. There is no complete contest without the hope of attending a great event; a victory is somehow fragmentary if it does not include the final jubilation and defeat undoubtedly triggers a sad feeling. The experience called sport induces in both athlete and spectator moods of enthusiasm, of rivalry and different other emotions but at the same time it engenders a sense of communion, of fellowship between the two of them. By their interaction, they both turn into generators, multiplicators and carriers of emotional messaging, feelings and passions. As bearers of these emotions, they enter the broad limelight of mass media, organizers, public opinion, economy and science, etc. Moreover, they are in the limelight of the community, as a general rule. Therefore, at this point, the community is responsible for fully committing itself to the effective consolidation of public awareness and to the development of a safety-framework, capable of reflecting the ethical dimension of sport, i.e. to encourage the individuals’ moral choices and judgements and promote their ethical virtues and beliefs.

We believe that sports requires a concurrent approach as tool and indicator of moral education in promoting fair play, as well as a key element in the analysis of the phenomenon of social exclusion of athletes, supporters, decision makers, etc., who do not adopt a value system in accordance with the sports-specific moral norms. The moral dimension of fair play is an important lever to be used against violence and intolerance in sports. Our argumentation in support of the conclusions includes - in addition to punitive measures - the opprobrium held up by society as well as the moral formation within educational establishments and within the family environment and the belonging social or religious group.

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