THE DILEMMA OF COMPETITIVE SPORT

By Matthew C. Clarke

Sport and competition both seem to be indispensable aspects of Australian society, and yet their combination in competitive sport has resulted in a mess of drug abuse, corrupt administration, violence on and off the field, cheating, game rigging and salary disputes. The prevalence of these behaviours casts doubt on the moral value of competitive sport and raises the question of whether sport should dissociate itself from competition. This article considers the source of these problems and suggests that they arise because of a psychological dilemma faced by everyone involved in competitive sports, particularly the players.

Must Sport be Competitive?

Before examining the moral value of competition in sport, the ground needs to be laid regarding what we mean by the terms "sport" and "competition" and whether the former simply necessitates the latter. For if sport *must* be competitive, there is no point asking whether it *should* be.

Some authors draw an important distinction between sports and games. Kohn, for instance uses sport to refer to "certain competitive games that require vigorous physical activity" (Kohn, 1992, p. 80n). But where Kohn sees sports as a subset of games, Parry sees sports and games as two overlapping categories, suggesting that chess is a game though not a sport, while track and field events are sports but not games. He proposes that "sports are rule-governed competitions wherein physical abilities are contested" (Parry, 1998, p. 205). Notice that by either definition, sports are necessarily competitive.

Loland thinks otherwise. He combines discourse analysis with mathematical game theory in order to distinguish the motivation of *playing to win* (which seeks an internal goal) from the motivation of *winning* (which seeks an external goal) (Loland, 1998, p.95). Kretchmar sees sport even less competitively. "At the heart of sport practices," he writes, "are tests, not contests" (Kretchmar, 1998, p.25). By this he means that sport is essentially about players collaborating in the task of constructing an appropriate test of their skills, not about players competing against each other (see also Simon, 1985). While this may be so for some players, it is hard to accept that this is essential to the nature of sport. What we see in practice, particularly in professional sport, is that those whose goal is to win, and hence enter sport as a contest, far outnumber those whose goal is to play their best. This is reflected in the often-quoted cliché "Winning isn't everything, it is the *only* thing."[1]

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The difference between Parry and Kohn on the one hand and Kretchmar and Loland on the other is that whereas the definitions of the former focus on structure, the analyses of the latter focus on intention. When we ask whether sport must be competitive, it is necessary to consider both the structure of sporting situations and the intentions of the players, for it is quite possible to play in a competitive structure with a non-competitive attitude and vice versa. This distinction between structural and intentional competition is made clear by Kohn. Whereas the former is an external characterisation of some inter-personal situations, the latter is an internal state of mind. The essence of structural competition is mutually exclusive goal attainment, that is, where two or more people (or groups) work towards some end in such a way that the achievement of the end by one restricts the achievement of that end by others. The essence of intentional competitiveness is the "proclivity for besting others." (Kohn, 1992, pp. 3ff)

It is not necessary for sports players to exhibit intentional competitiveness, but this is up to the individual. Players may choose to participate in their sport as a test rather than a contest; to emphasise "playing to win" rather than "winning". However, in terms of structure, sport is necessarily competitive.

What we Lose by Competing

There is more at risk in competing than the immediate possibility of losing the

contest, as Kohn points out in *No Contest* (see book review in this issue). Kohn's view, that competition in all its forms is "inherently undesirable", implies a severe criticism of sport. For if sport is necessarily competitive and competition is inherently undesirable, then sport itself must be evaluated negatively. This is an even more extreme position than Skillen's Idealist Pacifism[2] (Skillen, 1998, p. 173), since to reform sport satisfactorily would require that it be made uncompetitive, which would turn it into something other than sport. Whether sport can be redeemed from its association with competition will depend on the extent to which the positive and negative consequences of sport derive from sports' competitiveness.

The popular impression of sport is that it produces many benefits for both the individual and society. The individual develops character (a term which is rarely defined, but intended to encompass traits such as perseverance, discipline, self-control, loyalty and confidence), physical fitness, the ability to handle competitiveness in the broader society, personal status and recognition, and an appreciation of teamwork. But there is little empirical support for the claim that these actually do result from participation in sport (Edwards, 1973; Kohn, 1992). Furthermore, even if these are personal benefits of playing sport, most of them do not spring from the element of competition, but from the necessity to adhere to rules, the striving for mastery of physical skills, or training and playing together *with* others rather than competing against them. It is true that personal status and recognition by others can result from proving oneself "better" than others, but there are other ways to excel than via competition, which requires a string of losers for every winner.

The one exception in the list of supposed individual benefits is that one is trained in how to behave competitively. Certainly, the ability to compete gives one an advantage when competing in spheres other than sport, but this begs the question of whether competition is beneficial. Given that one of the key roles of sport is the socialisation of its participants, both players and spectators (Edwards, 1973, p. 59; Kohn, 1992, pp. 80ff), it is clearly beneficial to a competition-driven society that people be trained to be competitive. But do we benefit from a competition-driven society?

There are other social benefits of sport, such as the economic activity it generates and the provision of entertainment, but again, these do not spring from the element of competition. In fact, there is much that is lost by competing, as detailed by Kohn and neatly summarised by Butt (Butt, 1987, p. 72).

Firstly, we lose our playfulness. The essence of play is its intrinsic reward; we play for the joy of it. But the reward of competition is extrinsic, dependent on gaining some goal at the expense of another person. Sport, in so far as it is competitive, is not the paramount expression of play, but mutually excludes it. (Edwards, 1973, p. 59; Kohn, 1992, pp. 80ff)

By competing, we lose playfulness and a proper basis for self-esteem, we diminish relationships and performance, and we disqualify sportsmanship.

Secondly, we lose a proper basis for self-esteem. By rewarding winners and punishing (or at least ignoring) losers, we promote the idea that only winners are valuable. The competitive person is not just a high-achiever concerned about doing their best, but about doing better than others. It is not their competence but their performance relative to others which dictates their external reward on which their internal self-esteem is based. The self-esteem promoted by competition depends on external recognition, and yet there are always going to be more losers than winners. Consequently, while forever hoping to win, most competitors will lose, and losing a competition means losing external recognition, and subsequently losing one's value. Losing is internalised as being a loser; the only alternative to being Number 1 is to be a Zero. Even for those who win, a self-esteem based on "besting" others is unhealthy. Victory is never permanent and all winners will eventually lose their title. The need to win creates an elusive goal and a fear of failure, resulting in constant insecurity and anxiety. (Kohn, 1992, pp. 97-113; see also the discussion of internal and external reinforcements in Butt, 1987)

Thirdly, we lose out in terms of the quality of our relationships with each other. Competitive attitudes and structures assume a zero-sum game in which people are placed in opposition to each other. To succeed, it is necessary to desire that the other lose, and to actively work towards their losing. Competition negates the humanity of the opponent, making us treat them as merely objects obstructing our goals. Competition discourages generosity and empathy while encouraging envy for the stronger, contempt for the weaker and distrust for everyone. Furthermore, these effects are transferred from the competitive situation in which they are learnt to the rest of life. (Kohn, 1992, pp.132-143)

Fourthly, we lose performance. Contrary to popular wisdom, competition does not maximise but in fact typically diminishes performance quality. Since trying to do well and trying to beat others are different goals, requiring different strat-

egies, there is no reason to think that being effective at competing in some task is the same as being effective at the task. One may beat others without needing to do one's best, and focusing on beating the competition acts as a distraction from doing one's best. Numerous studies have shown that a co-operative environment is more productive than a competitive one (Butt, 1987, p. 66). Co-operation enhances learning and problem solving, provides positive emotional support and allows resources to be shared. (Kohn, 1992, pp. 45-65)

These losses, and the lack of any evidence of gain, provide good, perhaps overwhelming, reasons to eschew competition.

The Players' Dilemma

With regard to sport, there is one more serious loss caused by competition. When we compete, we lose the virtue of sportsmanship[3]. Sportsmanship, the display of attitudes such as fairness and generosity, is encouraged among players, coaches and spectators, but it is a foreign concept which is imported into sport's rhetoric rather than residing there naturally.

In competition there is but one goal, namely winning. The rewards of sport are structured to re-inforce this goal and numerous examples show the sort of behaviour which arises as a consequence. For instance, it is worth debilitating an opponent for the sake of the team's win, even at the risk of a personal reprimand, because the penalty for losing is even greater. It is worth the risk of taking steroids, even if there might be long-term health disadvantages. It is natural to paint an ugly picture of the opposition in order to embroil them in a media smear if it will generate some psychological advantage. It is quite properly competitive to take advantage of an opponent's weaknesses and to adjust the playing field and equipment to enhance one's own strengths. It is a reasonable part of winning to find out about the opposition's game plan whilst keeping one's own training methods and strategies secret. If one plays by the competitive standard, then cheating, artificial performance enhancement using drugs etc, and violence are not only legitimate but required. These sorts of behaviours are not the result of unbalanced psychology, but arise because the competitive structures we create and the competitive attitudes they promote are both about winning *and nothing else*. Any other value, such as sportsmanship, is external to the nature of competition and foreign to it.

Players are put in a structurally competitive environment and yet requested to not fully express their competitiveness.

Sports players must find it hard to concentrate on doing their best when they are consistently reminded that winning *defines* excellence (Keating, 1965) or that winning is more important than excellence. They need only do their best in so far as it leads towards the goal of beating their opponents. In contemporary society, "quality of performance is secondary to the result, and the values of the game are eclipsed by the cash value of winning" (Gibson, 1993, p. 2). The structure of mutually exclusive goal attainment focuses attention on the competition rather than competence, and promotes the thinking that any strategy designed to attain victory is acceptable, since there is no other goal. As Australian researcher Ron Laura has pointed out on numerous occasions, behaviour in sport reflects the state of our society, where "The traditional values of striving for excellence as a mark of personal achievement and self-discovery has been exchanged for the goal of winning at all costs, even the cost of personal integrity" (Laura & White, 1991).

However, sports players are also given the contradictory message that they must be good sportsmen; that there are things which would enhance their prospects of winning which are not allowed. Players are put in a structurally competitive environment and yet requested not to express their intentional competitiveness fully.

There may be no formal contradiction between competitiveness and sportsmanship, but to impose sportsmanship on top of competition is to face players with a psychological dilemma. How can they be expected to compete and yet be required to limit their competitiveness? If they act out the requirements of the competitive structure then they will use every method possible to secure victory and if they succeed, they will receive the rewards of trophies, money and fame. In following this course, they risk official and public denouncement for bending the rules too far, they may lose any sense of enjoyment in their sport and become alienated from other participants. On the other hand, if they play with fairness and generosity they may gain a genial public image and build a network of trust and goodwill. In doing so they must give up the "killer instinct" so often seen as vital to competitive success and get used to watching others receive the winners' rewards.

It should be noted that the boundaries of good sportsmanship are always fuzzy, rarely enabling the players to be clear about what is allowed and what not. This drug is explicitly banned, but what about this one with similar effects? Use of oxygen is out, but training at altitude is OK. Eye-gouging is punishable, but what about a scratch across the face? Barging with the shoulder is out, but

maybe using the upper arm will get past the judges. It will not become clear to players when they have overstepped the mark until the deed is done. Then they may have to put up with losing to someone who did the very thing they decided not to do, or face a disciplinary hearing and public condemnation for choosing to do it.

Sportsmanship is external to the nature of competition and foreign to it.

The dominant message is clear. Only winners are rewarded with prizes and recognition. For every example of players being recognised for their good sportsmanship there are a hundred examples of those rewarded for winning. Yet all players must find their own individual answer to the psychological dilemma in which we place them. We should not be surprised then that many players choose to value the rewards of competing over the rewards of good sportsmanship.

Endnotes

[1] This quote is attributed to US football coach Vince Lombardi, though he either didn't say it or regretted saying it (Simon, 1985, pp. 13, 32n; Kohn, 1992, pp. 3, 247n). If what he did say was "Winning isn't everything, but wanting to win is" then he was merely agreeing with Loland's distinction. Nevertheless, the popularity of the cliché shows how prevalent the competitive attitude is.

[2] Skillen defines Idealist Pacifism somewhat scornfully as the desire to "reform sport into something innocuous by taking the violence and competitiveness out of it" (Skillen, 1998, pp. 173). He suggests playing frisbee, cycling, bush walking, climbing and hang-gliding as examples, but Kohn would categorise such pursuits as games or recreation rather than as sport.

[3] Unfortunately there is as yet no suitable gender-neutral equivalent to "sportsmanship", but I hope the reader will interpret the term inclusively.

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