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The Obsessive Athlete in Encouraging Violence

From almost the dawn of human history, we have engaged in competition of one form or another. Whether it was the caveman who could bring home the biggest piece of meat or the athlete who can bring home the most medals and trophies, whether to survive or gain glory and "prestige", competition is just something that *is*. It drives the spirit forward, makes us do our best and pushes the limits of what we know we can do. But sometimes it is not always a good thing. When human beings become too obsessed with winning and physical perfection, it can lead to grievous errors in thinking and in action that hurt humanity rather than help it. Sometimes, this excessive ambition for excellence only leads to greater violence among people, teams, individual countries, and the world at large.

More so today than in ancient times, sports are a big part of international relations and the way that different countries interact with each other. Things like the Olympic Games have become a world-wide way of connecting with other cultures around the globe through shared interest and excitement, or expressing national feelings towards another political entity; an example of this, as Peter Cohen explains in his *The Architecture of Doom*, is the way that Hitler used the 1936 Berlin Olympics as propaganda to effectively show that the German state was unprejudiced and peaceful, in spite of the harsh and clearly racist Nuremberg laws that had recently been put into

place in Germany. Hitler knew that the Games, purported as a way to bring countries together in friendship and better international ties, were a good way to smooth over Germany's roughening relationship with other European nations and the United States, and he used that knowledge to his advantage. But the way that Hitler used the Olympics brings up an important question -- are these kinds of international sports festivities really a good idea?

It has been argued by many in favor of international sports competition that by allowing athletes from all over the world to vie against each other in so-called "friendly rivalry" they forge bonds of camaraderie between people and countries and put a stop to bullets that may have been fired and wars that may have been fought otherwise. In "The Sporting Spirit" George Orwell speaks out against this theory, saying that:

I am always amazed when I hear people saying that sport creates goodwill between the nations, and that if only common peoples of the world could meet one another at football or cricket, they would have no inclinations to meet on the battlefield. Even if one didn't know it from concrete examples . . . that international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred, one could deduce it from general principles (Orwell 1).

He points out that because nationalistic pride is inherently on the line during any competition between countries, the athletes are under more pressure to win and, in turn, more likely to resort to violence to achieve the victory, even if they know they could get called for a foul because of their actions. Even the fans, who know they cannot be directly involved in the games, are liable to forget this detail in a moment of impassioned defense of their favored team and interfere with the match. Riots in the stands,

harkening back to the howling mobs of the Ancient Roman Coliseum, are not uncommon in many sports, and some supporters will jeer insults at the opposing team or worse throw things to distract the opponent. The higher the stakes and the greater the emotions that are caught up in the midst of the competition, the greater the chance that the athletes and the crowd will feel that they have to do something drastic and aggressive to prevail.

Aggression is not a recently developed by-product of sports though -- athletes have been using violence as a means of accomplishing their goals for thousands of years, and ancient spectators were no better either. In *Let's Kill 'Em: Understanding and Controlling Violence in Sports*, Jon Leizman shows that the heroes of Homer's *Iliad*, one of the oldest illustrations of sports in society, acted in a similar manner to their modern-day counterparts:

The participants, too, engage in a kind of trash talk, complaining about their fellow competitors' recklessness, as is the case when Menelaos yells at Antilokhos, 'no man in the world is a more dangerous pest than you are.' . . . Although they barely avoid coming to blows, due to the intercession of Achilles, the sense of being at the edge of violence dominates the chariot race, from the gods, to the fans, to the participants, not unlike the atmosphere created at a modern professional football game. (Leizman 30)

From his description, it's obvious that violence in sports is nothing new. In fact, Mr. Leizman tells us that " . . . the level of violence [in the early Olympics] was often far greater than anything seen in modern times" (Leizman 32). While Leizman seems to

agree with Orwell in that violence is an important part of sports today, he also notes that it is quite possible that this feature of aggression has lessened to some extent, at least since the bloody days of the Roman gladiator and the Greek Olympic athlete.

Admittedly, there are not many gory deaths by sword or eye-gougings that take place today in sports, but that is little consolation to the athlete who ends up badly injured because a member of the opposing team felt they needed to push harder to achieve their win. The unhealthy way that some athletes and coaches obsess over attaining the pinnacle of human physical perfection is ridiculous to the point where it becomes dangerous, not only to the other players, but to the athlete, too. By condoning this kind of obsession and the underhanded ways of winning that can come with it, sports that are supposed to promote human welfare and pacifism are actually encouraging enmity between athletes, fans, and countries. The threat, even though it hides behind a false face of alliance, is still ever-present, just it has always been and shall continue to be.

Works Cited

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