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## Aggression and its Influence on Sports Performance

**K Krishnaveni, Ahmed Shahin**

### Abstract

Aggression and aggressive behavior are sometimes out of the ethical realm of sports, and sometimes very much part of sport, depending on the type of sport, the demand on the performer, and so on. Aggression includes different behaviours that serve a common end – to inflict pain or injury on the opponent. Several studies have been conducted by researchers worldwide but there still remain gray areas that fail to pinpoint offensive or aggressive behavior in sport. This paper aims to throw light on the reasons for the existence and persistence of such behavior and possible remedies to deal with the same.

**Keywords:** Aggression, Assertiveness, Catharsis effect, Testosterone, Finger-digit ratio.

### Objectives of the study

As one contemplates the issue of sport aggression, several questions are raised - whether aggression justified in certain sports, or does aggressive behavior in the game work as a catharsis effect or release of tension either by playing or by mere watching, or whether aggression on the other hand breed more aggression on and off the field, or if it is possible to reduce aggression. This paper addresses these issues that have been raised over and over again in the sports arena.

### 1. Introduction

Aggression is any interpersonal behavior intended to cause physical harm or mental distress to a person or persons. In the sports context, aggression can be defined as an unprovoked physical or verbal assault, and aggressiveness as the intent to commit such an assault. Aggression has also been defined as 'an overt verbal or physical act that can psychologically or physically injure another person or oneself'.

Aggression today is part and parcel of any contemporary sport. Over the past twenty years, most sports have been undergoing drastic changes, and several problem areas have been located and addressed that form the core of sports research. Some of them are:

1. Drug influence and the problems it poses
2. The increase of professionalism
3. Increased media attention and glorification
4. Commercialization of sports worldwide
5. Introduction of judicial norms and civil/criminal law in professional sports
6. Reduced tolerance levels in modern day athletes

### 2. A distinct line between Assertiveness and Aggression

Assertiveness, for a comparison, involves the use of legitimate physical or verbal force to achieve one's purpose. Here, as opposed to aggression, there is no intent to harm the opponent. Even if the opponent is harmed as a result of a tackle in Soccer, it is not necessarily aggression. It is merely assertive play, as long as it is within the spirit of the rules and the intent to harm is not present. Assertiveness requires the use of unusual effort and energy. If there is no intent to harm, then any resultant harm is only incidental to the game. The sporting community draws distinct lines between assertiveness and aggression.

### 3. Aggression in sports

Terry and Jackson (1985) defined aggression in sport as: 'harm-inducing behavior bearing no direct relationship to the competitive goals of sport, and relates, therefore, to incidents of uncontrolled aggression outside the rules of sport, rather than highly competitive behavior within the rule boundaries.'

Aggressive and violent actions which might be illegal outside sport, or in supposedly non-contact sports like Basketball, Football, Cricket, etc. are legal and allowed in the context of combat sports like Judo, Karate and Wrestling, or team contact sports like Rugby, American football and Ice hockey. All these sports are characterised by high levels of aggression and often violent physical contact which may be within the rules of the game and not intended to injure. The same sort of behaviour outside the sports context may however be defined as criminal. Participants in these sports have also accepted the inevitability of rough contact and possible injury in these sports.



**Fig 1:** Aggression is sometimes natural for the game



**Fig 2:** Aggression is sometimes unwarranted

A high degree of aggression that is not in line with competitive spirit is illegitimate and sometimes even illegal. In some sports, however, there appears to be a gray zone where aggression is accepted by 'victims' as a legitimate part of the game.

W. Gordon Russell (2008) provided a good understanding of the real meaning of aggression in sports. He had discussed the role of various external social influences on human aggression or the effect of provocations such as hurtful remarks, chants and songs were discussed. The most likely targets for aggression are officials, women, young entrants, and athletes who are victims of racial bias.

Katherine Simpson (2001) has found evidence about the role of testosterone and its impact on aggression. Changes in the concentration of hormones can have profound effects on mood and behaviour in humans.

Sex differences have also been considered as contributing factors to aggression. Evolutionary Psychology states that all

behavior is designed to perpetuate the continuance of the gene pool and ensure the survival of the species. This evolutionary imperative contributes to gender differences in behavior.

Aggression has a new marker: the finger digit ratio, which is thought to be linked with a number of personal characteristics. According to this theory the shorter a man's index finger is when compared to the ring finger, the more aggressive he will be.

Environmental factors are also believed to have an influence on the state of mood. For example temperature, noise, drugs, alcohol, steroids, presence of weapons, have all shown to increase aggression.

### 3. Types of Aggression

Aggression can be of the following types

1. Direct: where the athlete can abuse face to face directly or hurt somebody by words or actions.
2. Indirect: hurting others by gossips, rumours, internal murmurings etc.
3. Instrumental: this is cognitive, where the aggression is intentional and planned but not to directly hurt someone, rather for gaining something like a reward, fame, scoring a goal, etc.
4. Emotional: also called impulsive aggression refers to aggression that occurs with only a small amount of forethought or intent.

Several theories on aggression have been proposed but they fall into four main categories:

1. Instinct theory suggests that aggression is the result of an inherent drive like hunger, thirst etc.
2. Social learning theory suggests that aggression is a function of learning, not merely a biological drive.
3. Moral reasoning theory where the aggressor justifies his or her action as proper.
4. Frustration-aggression hypothesis states that aggression is a result of frustration.



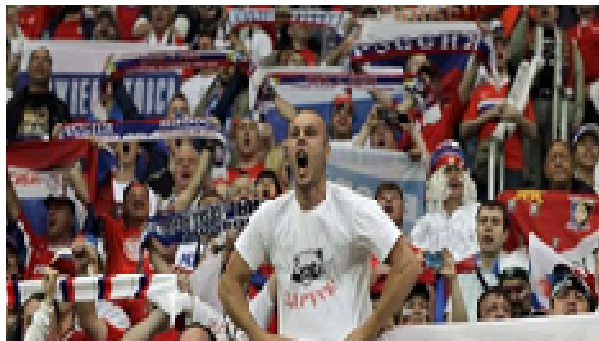
### 4. The Catharsis Effect

The Catharsis effect is the release of pent-up frustration that makes one feel better. It is a purging of the anger and frustration associated with not being able to accomplish a goal. Venting frustration upon a punching bag or some other inanimate object may serve as a useful catharsis. Venting frustration upon another human being, however, is unacceptable behavior that is likely to lead to more aggression.

Aggression is not cathartic i.e., it does not lead to a reduction in the desire to aggress. Aggression only leads to an increase in aggression as tempers flare and as the behavior becomes learned.

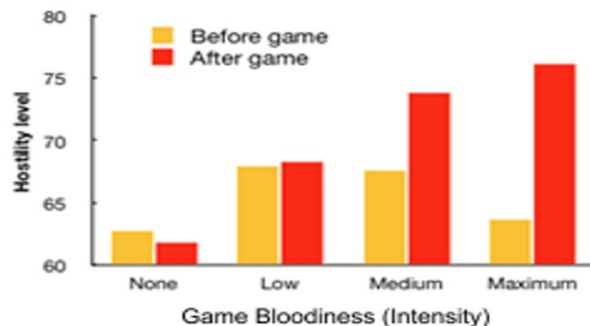
### 5. Fan Violence

Some of the dirtiest instances of sports aggression and violence happen among the spectators. There are individuals who instigate violence. These individuals are attracted to violence tend to score high on the personality scale for anger and physical aggression.



### 6. Effects of Aggression on Sports Performance

It is a common knowledge that acts of aggression on the part of an athlete will constitute a distraction and result in a poor performance. These acts are likely to be distracting to the team also as a whole. Research has shown, for example, that the poorer a team is in the performance, more likelihood it will engage in aggression. As the game gets bloodier (more intense), hostility levels after the game are significantly higher.



### 7. Aggression due to Situational Factors

1. Temperature: Higher temperatures can lead aggressive athletes to become more aggressive.
2. Retaliation due to perception of victim's intent: Some athletes imagine that an opponent's intent is to inflict harm, so they respond with aggression against the

opponent.

3. Fear of retaliation by victim: To an extent, the fear of retaliation by the victim of aggression can discourage the aggressive player from initiating that aggression.
4. Game situation: Several studies have shown that more aggressiveness occurs as there is a big difference between scores. When the scores are close, aggression is at a minimum.
5. Rivalry due to familiarity: Familiarity breeds contempt. As players become more familiar with one another due to frequency of play, rivalries also may increase, and aggression in turn becomes more frequent.
6. Reduced goal orientation: As the ego state of the athlete increases, there is general lack of respect for the game or the official. A high task goal orientation results in a higher level of sportsmanship.

### 8. Controlling Aggression in Sport

With the cooperation of all concerned parties, aggression in sport can be minimized. However, some most influential people sometimes actually end up promoting violence in their urge to sell tickets.

Angry feelings and angry behavior, the precursor to aggression and violence can be modified through proper anger management training and role play.

### 9. Controlling Aggression and Violence by Athletes

1. Athletes who involve in aggressive acts must be severely penalized, at levels much more than any reinforcement that the game offers.
2. Young athletes must be taught to have non-aggressive but assertive behavior.
3. Athletes should be rewarded for showing restraint and patience in emotionally charged game situations.
4. An athlete's anger feelings can be regulated through proper role play.
5. Tolerance and patience on the part of the coach or leader will reduce violent behavior in athletes.
6. A friendly atmosphere, more in the lines of a family event should be ensured by the organizers.
7. Aggressive athletes can be provided proper counseling and rehabilitation.

### 10. Controlling Aggression and Violence by Fans

1. Troublemakers should be closely monitored.
2. Known offenders should be identified and denied admission.
3. Distribution of alcoholic beverages/cigarettes at sporting events should be stopped.
4. Media can help by not glamorizing the aggressive acts by players or fans.

### 11. Conclusion

Aggression and violence have become common in modern day sporting events, especially those that have high emotional content. Whatever the degree of aggression, it can be minimized by adopting a systematic approach at the psychological and sociological levels. Tolerance and empathy on the part of the organizers and the coach, followed by proper training to the athlete may be the solution.

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