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## Sportsmanship in sport: An ethical and performance-based lens

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### Abstract

This study uses a narrative review method to understand sportsmanship through ethical and performance-based lenses. Philosophically, sportsmanship is examined through the lens of normative and virtue ethics, utilizing established constructs such as fair play, respect, and integrity. On the performance dimension, a review of existing literature integrates findings from quantitative, correlational, and meta-analytic studies investigating psychological traits - namely mental toughness, emotional intelligence, and prosocial behaviour, as mediators of sportsmanship and athletic performance. Findings demonstrate that sportsmanship, rooted in ethical conduct and character development, is closely aligned with enhanced group cohesion, individual resilience, and superior competitive outcomes. This integrative study provides a nuanced understanding of sportsmanship as both a moral imperative and a driver of performance.

**Keywords:** Sportsmanship, Ethics, Morality, Performance, Values, Integrity, Fair play

### Introduction

#### Ethical lens

The concept of sportsmanship has attracted much philosophical attention, particularly in ethics and philosophy of sport. This is due to the fact that from a philosophical perspective there is profound relationship between sport and character building. With emphasis on fair play, respect, integrity and self-control sportsmanship is essentially a moral construct. Sportsmanship illustrates sport as a place for ethical action and moral development while engaged in a shared human endeavour that transcends cultural, historical and political boundaries. Sport philosophers such as note that sportsmanship is more than the mere observance of sanctioned rules. It is upholding the spirit of the game by display of devotion to fair play and respect for competitors, officials, and the game itself. Virtue ethicists identify sportsmanship with the development of virtues such as honesty, humility, and self-control. Sportsmanship, thus, is a constitutive aspect of sport competitions, rendering sport an arena for ethical action and human flourishing. From a normative ethical standpoint, sportsmanship is much more than just following rules. It represents what athletes ought to do, by displaying certain moral values while competing. Fair play, for example, encompasses not only adherence to established rules but also a commitment to equity, transparency, and honesty. Athletes who engage in fair play recognize that the true spirit of sport lies in competing on equal terms and valuing the process over the outcome. This emphasis on procedural justice aligns with broader ethical principles found in normative ethics, such as impartiality and moral responsibility. John Rawls' (1999) <sup>[12]</sup> theory of justice as fairness and equitable treatment provides a valuable lens to understand sportsmanship. It emphasizes impartiality and fair treatment, ensuring that all competitors play on equal terms under clear and fair procedures. Echoes the same thought. According to him ethical behaviour in sports includes respecting opponents and maintaining the game's integrity. This means athletes should not only follow rules but also accept moral duties that uphold the ethical culture of sports. Such principles enable an environment where genuine athletic competition thrives. For example, at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the gold medal for the men's high jump event ended up in a tie - and when officials gave the option to the finalists to settle with a jump-off,

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the athletes instead asked to share the gold medal, with both of them getting a gold medal and sending a message of true respect and sportsmanship to the world. Equally central to sportsmanship is the value of respect, which applies to all participants in the sporting domain—opponents, teammates, coaches, officials, and spectators. Respect involves acknowledging the inherent dignity and worth of others, regardless of differences in skill, status, or background. This notion aligns closely with Immanuel Kant's (1785/1998) moral philosophy, which emphasizes treating others as ends in themselves, not merely as means. In sports, this means respecting the dignity of all participants and upholding the essence of the rules instead of using them unfairly. Athletes who exemplify respect demonstrate humility in victory and grace in defeat, maintaining courteous behaviour even under competitive pressure. Additionally, within the virtue ethics tradition, Aristotle (350 B.C.E./2009) viewed respectful behaviour as a function of good character and a balanced disposition. Together, these perspectives show that respect in sport is not just a matter of etiquette, but a moral imperative that reinforces social cohesion and ethical conduct.

Another important pillar of sportsmanship is integrity—the alignment between ethical principles and personal behaviour. A sportsman exhibits integrity when he follows the rules of a game not simply when it is advantageous and convenient to him but he exhibits same moral behaviour even in situations disadvantageous to him. Integrity involves honesty, sincerity, and a rejection of deceitful practices such as cheating or gamesmanship. It implies relinquishing an advantage in strategy in order to uphold ethical standards. According to Agnew, Henderson, & Woods (2017) [1], integrity in sport fosters trust and credibility, not only among competitors but within the broader community of sport. In this sense, integrity transcends individual action and becomes a collective value that sustains the legitimacy and meaning of athletic competition. For example, at the 2020 Santander Triathlon, when James Teagle was a few metres away from finishing third, he took a wrong turn. Fourth placed Diego Méndrida overtook him but when he realised the error, he stopped right before the finish line and allowed Teagle to cross first. This display of integrity was remarkable - towards the end of a triathlon when one's mind and body is fully drained, giving up the final medal place and prize money displayed how much Méndrida values sportsmanship over winning. He was later awarded honorary third place and prize.

Beyond these specific virtues, the ethics of sportsmanship also includes a broader commitment to personal development and excellence. Unlike purely outcome-oriented frameworks, the ethical view of sport emphasizes the process—the striving for improvement, discipline, and mastery. For example, in 'The Republic', Plato (Reid, 2007) [13] argues that sports can be instrumental to moral development of a person. He believes that participating in sports helps physical, intellectual and moral growth. It encourages inner harmony, prepares a person to handle the intellectual challenges and mental discipline required in the study of philosophy and helps to cultivate moral strength required for people in public positions. One reason sport can contribute to the moral development lies in the positive values found in traditional structures of sport. Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) [11] idea of a "practice" can help us to understand this more clearly." According to him practice is a complex and organized form of social activity where participants aim for goods that are inherent to the activity itself. When one participates in an established practice, he or she agrees to follow the standards

of excellence and tradition specific to that practice. Various Sports, art or sciences are all examples of established practices. Following MacIntyre, (1984) [11] many scholars consider sports as a practice and believe that developing skills crucial to the practice of sports like speed, strength, grit, determination leads to moral development of an individual participating in sports enhancing their sportsmanship, fairness, integrity, or teamwork qualities. Further by participating in such practices, people not only improve their skills but also deepen their understanding of what is good or worthwhile. Through this, both individual abilities and shared ideas about excellence and purpose are developed and expanded.

According to Jones and McNamee (2003) [8], the development of virtues like trust, courage, and fairness is both a requirement for and a result of genuine participation. Sport functions as a kind of moral or character laboratory, where individuals challenge themselves and others to discover their limits while striving toward the goals of the game.

To sum up we can say that true sportsmanship, when viewed through a philosophical lens, is ethically grounded practice. It is the true essence of sports as it requires the sportsperson to go beyond mere playing and complying with the rules of the game, to exhibit a set of ethical virtues which promote not only a healthy, fair, happy and meaningful sports environment but also cultivates character ultimately culminating in the well-being of the sportsperson. Transcending victory or loss the focus is on fair play, integrity and mutual respect making the process of competition meaningful and enriching for all involved.

### Performance-based lens

We saw how sportsmanship embodies qualities such as fairness, self-discipline, respect, integrity, and perseverance. These factors are also psychological characteristics that enhance performance in high-pressure situations. Turan *et al.* (2022) [15] examined the psychological components of sportsmanship behaviour among athletes and discovered that factors like self-efficacy, kindness, self-control, and empathy collectively accounted for approximately 48% of the variance in sportsmanship scores, with self-efficacy alone representing about 13.4%. These findings suggest a connection between sportsmanship and performance.

### Apart from that, it seems like athletes who have certain desirable mental skills are more likely to show sportsmanship:

1. **Mental Toughness (MT):** A comprehensive review of mental toughness within sport psychology revealed that elite athletes and coaches frequently regard mental toughness as pivotal for achieving success (Liew *et al.*, 2019) [10]. MT empowers athletes to view pressure in a positive light and uphold ethical, disciplined reactions when confronted with challenges. In support of this, a qualitative meta-analysis of clutch performance research indicated that self-efficacy and MT are consistently associated with optimal performance under stress (Hufton *et al.*, 2024) [7]. Athletes who possess greater self-confidence perceive pressure as a challenge rather than a threat, which helps in maintaining their composure and focus.
2. **Emotional Intelligence (EI):** EI refers to the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and manage emotions, which is also in harmony with the essence of sportsmanship. A comprehensive analysis of 21 studies revealed that EI has

a low yet strong positive relationship with sports performance, particularly through enhanced stress management and the application of psychological techniques such as imagery and concentration (Zoghalmi *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[16]</sup>. This research also discovered that within high school physical education environments, the components of EI especially self-confidence and the ability to manage others' emotions, were significantly linked to improved performance and lower levels of anxiety. The same EI competencies, such as emotional regulation, empathy, and self-awareness, are crucial for sportsmanlike conduct. This also includes managing frustration, showing respect towards opponents and authority figures, and maintaining ethical behavior even in high-pressure situations.

3. Prosocial actions such as assisting teammates, adhering to norms, and exhibiting fairness, serve as a tangible manifestation of sportsmanship and are crucial for team dynamics. Graupensperger and Tisak's (2018) <sup>[6]</sup> research involving 238 youth ice hockey players demonstrated that prosocial behavior in the locker room was a predictor of greater perceived task cohesion (unity towards common objectives), while antisocial actions had a negative impact. Another study focusing on 272 team-sport athletes found that prosocial behaviors among teammates positively influenced task cohesion and negatively affected burnout through positive emotions, whereas antisocial behaviors were linked to reduced cohesion and increased burnout through negative emotions (Al-Yaaribi & Kavussanu, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>.

These findings are consistent with a more extensive body of evidence indicating that team cohesion, particularly in relation to task cohesion enhances performance and elevates group motivation within high-pressure environments. A meta-analysis of research focusing on group cohesion revealed that cohesion exhibits a stronger correlation with performance in independent contexts, such as sports teams, compared to other types of groups (Carron *et al.*, 2002) <sup>[5]</sup>. An investigation during 2024 conducted in the rugby union demonstrated that team cohesion promotes off-field prosocial behaviors through the mediating effects of empathy and norms of fair play (Bisagno *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[4]</sup>. This implies that cohesive environments serve to reinforce ethical behavior beyond the confines of the playing field.

For applied work, this indicates that athlete development programs focusing on mental training techniques (such as self-talk, visualization, and goal setting), emotional skill development (including emotional awareness, empathy, and regulation), and the promotion of team norms (like fair-play expectations and supportive peer interactions) can effectively build both sportsmanship and competitive resilience. Consequently, coaches and sports psychologists can promote both moral growth and performance achievements by blending psychological skills training with character development.

Overall, there is an abundance of literature that suggests a link between sportsmanship and traits of mental toughness, emotional intelligence, discipline, and prosocial behavior. Mental toughness and self-efficacy help to manage reactions during challenging situations, emotional intelligence facilitates both self-regulation and the regulation of others, disciplined self-control fosters ethical behavior in stressful circumstances, and prosocial behavior enhances team unity. Collectively, these components strengthen sportsmanship,

creating environments where athletes can maintain integrity and focus as a group even when faced with pressure.

## Conclusion

A view of sportsmanship from two lenses (ethical and performance) reveals that sportsmanship is both a moral practice and a vital antecedent for excellence in sport. Philosophical views place sportsmanship as a display of virtues and mutual respect, guiding athletes toward personal growth and meaningful sport participation. Performance focused research complements this view - suggesting that desirable mental skills are closely linked with ethical conduct and prosocial behaviour. Ultimately, sportsmanship enriches the athletic experience, going beyond victory or defeat, and contributes to the holistic development of individuals and communities.

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