

PIGSKIN AND BLACK BELTS: CAN MARTIAL ARTS PROVIDE INSIGHT FOR COMPETITIVE AND AGGRESSIVE SPORTS LIKE AMERICAN FOOTBALL?

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Competitive and aggressive sports provide recreational sport contexts for youth and adolescents across the globe. One of the most popular recreational sports worldwide is martial arts, a sport characterized as aggressive yet backed in the traditional form of the sport by a principled philosophy. The researchers engaged in naturalistic inquiry through full participant observation in a traditional martial arts club. The purpose of the research was to closely examine the teaching of traditional martial arts to determine whether lessons could be derived for competitive and aggressive sports like American football. Philosophical and psychological themes emerged from the research, including a counterbalanced ethic of nonviolence and restraint and achievement orientations reflective of the researchers' sport backgrounds, respectively.

Over the course of the last fifty years, coinciding with what could be characterized as the communication and entertainment revolution, the professional model of sport has evolved to be ubiquitous through television and electronic media. Twenty-four hour broadcasts detail every aspect associated with professional and intercollegiate sports. Interscholastic sports have increasingly been targeted, as intercollegiate sport fans thirst for information and airtime on their school's athletic recruits. Grassroots youth sports, most notably Little League baseball and Pop Warner football, even have their respective championships broadcast on national television. American culture celebrates and lifts high these titans of the gridiron, diamond, or hardwood. The message being broadcast into our living rooms on a daily basis is aligned with the professional or business model of sport. Winning and athletic success is the ultimate goal. Yet, these televised sports figures at all levels of competition represent a tiny fraction of overall

sport participants.

According to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA, 2007), approximately 64 million youth ages 7-17 participate in the ten most popular team, dual, or individual sports. Many of these children are introduced to various sports at developmentally sensitive ages. With the pervasive nature of sport entertainment coupled with overzealous adults reliving their sport successes or failures vicariously through children, sport settings for youth and adolescents are increasingly in need of an underlying ethic to support more of a balanced approach to sport programming. For aggressive contact sports like American football, the need is heightened. The purpose of our research was to closely examine a seemingly aggressive recreational sport setting in martial arts that teaches a principled philosophy concurrently with physical skills to determine whether lessons can be extrapolated and applied to competitive and aggressive sport settings such as American football.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIALIZATION OF AGGRESSION THROUGH SPORT

The operationalization of *socialization* is best described for the purposes of this research in the context of sport. McPherson (1981) described socialization into and through sport as:

...a learning process wherein a novice, through observation, imitation and interaction with significant others (role models) within social systems such as the family, school, peer group, mass media and sport team, acquires the affective, cognitive and behavioral components of a social role. (p. 266)

For high contact sport settings such as American football, ice hockey, and lacrosse, where aggressiveness is considered an attribute for participants, aggressive behavior may not be limited to the playing field. The culture surrounding the sport and resulting socialization may influence participants on and off the field. Since the call by Gaskell and Pearton (1979) and others for an increased emphasis on sport as a social structure to study aggression, research on sport and aggression has exploded across multiple disciplines (e.g., Bredemeier, 1983; Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson, 2001; Gagnon, 1997; Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Leizman, 1999; Rees, 2001; Russell, 1981, 1993).

Empirical evidence on contact sport settings has suggested an association with aggressive tendencies in participants. Some findings were dependent upon numerous contextual factors. Two significant results emerged out of a study conducted by Guivernau and Duda (2002) into socialization of aggressive tendencies in 194 adolescent male and female European American soccer players. Players who judged their team climate to be pro-aggressive and players who believed their coach supported aggression reported significantly higher scores on the self-

likelihood-to-aggress (SLA) measure. Endresen and Olweus (2005) found participants engaging in power sports (e.g., boxing, wrestling, weightlifting) exhibited higher levels of violent and non-violent antisocial behavior outside the sport context. The “macho” culture surrounding these sport environments was postulated as serving an enhancement effect for aggression. Similarly, Miller, Melnick, Farrell, Sabo, and Barnes (2006) found that adolescents self-identifying with the “jock” label were more likely than other subjects to engage in nonfamily violence. Gagnon (1997) conducted qualitative research, interviewing ten men prone to conjugal violence, ten non-violent men, and ten practitioners working with either violent men or female victims of violent men. The central purpose of the research was to examine sport culture as it relates to the socialization of violence. Gagnon concluded:

If one admits that sport culture is one of the last male bastions, if one demonstrates that this bastion is in fact one of the central places for the apprenticeship of hegemonic models of violence, is it not time to carefully reconsider, confront, and analyze not only the place sport culture occupies but the manner in which it reproduces itself? (p. 68)

These findings on socialization of aggressive behavior through sport highlight the need for increased research. When examining tenets associated with sports at all levels, the degree of competition manifested for each context is a critical component and may hold the key to an increased understanding of socialization of aggression through sport.

COMPETITION

From the playing field to the boardroom, the classroom to the highway, competition is omnipresent in American society manifested in either a *structural* (i.e., extrinsic, won/loss) or *intentional* (i.e., intrinsic, desire to be the best) manner (Kohn, 1992). According to Kohn, competition is a learned rather than an innate behavior. This form of learning is obviously highly valued within a free market system like capital-

ism. Therefore, limiting the competitive fire in sport may be viewed as limiting a competitive business spirit. However, providing youth with a counterbalance to pervasive competitive influences should not be viewed as a limitation but rather as a potential strength.

Status and attention afforded competitive sport in American society enhances the emphasis on competition and winning. Whenever likeable coaches are fired for failing to lead the team to victory, some fans and sport commentators will inevitably deplore the overemphasis placed on winning. Yet, these same fans and commentators continue their support and rarely call for changes. A potentially dangerous cycle has been created at all levels of American sport. Despite a coach's best intentions, players realize the ultimate bottom line is their win-loss record. The message is clear, “Win or else!” This can cloud indirect developmental themes people normally associate as perceived benefits of competitive team sport. Robert Gass (as cited in Utne, 2006), a world-renowned leadership coach, stated:

When I am called in to work with organizations or coalitions, it almost always comes down to a problem with people not being able to work together. It's competition rather than cooperation. Fear rather than trust. “Me” rather than “we.” (p. 50)

Scholars who decry competition in favor of cooperation may have noble ends of peace and harmonic society in mind. However, elimination of competition from American society is a lost cause even the most progressive thinkers would have difficulty realistically envisioning. In promoting a counterbalance to the socialization processes of competition and aggression through infusion of developmental teaching into American sport, particularly at the recreational level, we believe an alternative paradigm is not only plausible within current structures of American sport but also realistic from a competitive standpoint. Recognition that competition does not separate us along territorial or adversarial lines is a powerful socializing message essential to counterbalance the perspective of

children like nine-year old Diamond Pless of the Greater Miami Pop Warner football league who stated, “I get to hit the person, then I get to mash ‘im, [sic] then I get to slam ‘im and make ‘im run to their daddy for advice. When you hit somebody, they get afraid of you” (as cited in Powell, 2003, p. 120). Youth development through aggressive and competitive sport is one step in this critical process.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & SPORT

The study of developmental processes of children and adolescents has commenced for centuries, but youth development as the buzzword for this field of study evolved over the last two decades within psychology and related fields such as education and leisure studies (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001). A wealth of foundations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies have funded and driven research and created a vast array of resources during this time period. Numerous definitions of youth development have emerged from these organizations and researchers associated with these organizations. These definitions provide rich contexts in which to frame research and practice, but MacDonald & Valdivieso (2001) summarized the central mission of youth development in stating, “what we want our children to acquire is a rich array of social and intellectual knowledge, attitudes, and competencies that will enable them to be caring people and productive citizens” (p. 172).

Youth development through sport in the United States has historically revolved around the notion that sport prepares children and adolescents for life (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004). The overarching assumption of sport advocates is that social learning obtained through sport is overwhelmingly positive, with participants being taught such life lessons as teamwork, motivation, work ethic, and competitive spirit (Coakley, 2002; Tutko & Bruns, 1979). Athletes, coaches, administrators, and academicians promote these benefits in an effort to justify participation and encourage interest in sports. Yet, people accept these purported

benefits as fact without rigorous empirical evidence to back the claims. Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, and Seefeldt (2002) stated:

Comparative research has revealed that being involved in sport alone is not sufficient to ensure that participants will learn sportsmanlike [sic] attitudes and behaviors. In fact, sport may be a domain that suspends moral obligations or encourages unethical behavior for strategic gain in competition particularly when winning is overemphasized. (p. 38)

Further, even when youth learn positive lessons through sport, transferability of these lessons to other domains is believed to be rare when lessons are indirect (Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius, & Presbrey, 2004). Youth development through sport provides an opportunity to directly teach life lessons that may be transferred into academic and personal domains. The difference lies in overt versus implied delivery of these life lessons. Many traditional martial arts programs are representative of this overt delivery of life lessons by offsetting physical and aggressive aspects of teaching with a philosophical ethic of non-violence and self-control.

MARTIAL ARTS AS CONTEXT

Leizman (1999) proposed a future direction for diminishing socialization of competition and aggression through sport by advocating for infusion of Eastern philosophy in Western sport. Martial arts are most closely associated with Eastern philosophy. Although research into developmental benefits of martial arts is limited in sport and recreation research, several studies have utilized martial arts as a context for social science research. Chami-sather (2004) found significant transference of principles from Taekwondo teaching into the academic domain.

The most poignant research supporting our current efforts came from Trulson (1986), who found significant differences in propensity for continued juvenile delinquency between two experimental groups and a control group. Juvenile delinquents in the two

experimental groups received training in either the traditional Korean martial art of Taekwondo with an underlying philosophical ethic and teaching or a "modern" offshoot of the martial art without an underlying ethical and teaching philosophy. Participants in the traditional group exhibited decreased aggressiveness and numerous other positive developmental benefits, whereas participants in the modern group displayed the exact opposite tendencies and exhibited more aggressiveness than traditional and control groups.

Based on results of these studies and targeted research on specific participation opportunities, we elected to conduct naturalistic inquiry through participant observation in a traditional martial arts setting. Similar to the delineation made by Trulson (1986) in assigning labels of *modern* versus *traditional* to the comparison of martial arts settings, King and Williams (1997) described the difference between martial arts settings as *contest-oriented* versus traditional. Contest-oriented martial arts is naturally more focused on preparing participants for competition, whereas traditional martial arts is more focused upon self-defense and includes a principled ethic based on Eastern philosophy (King & Williams).

METHOD

Different types of observation have been defined along a continuum from complete observer to complete participant (Henderson, 2006). For the purposes of closely examining a martial arts setting, we decided upon full immersion as participants in a Cuong Nhu oriental martial arts club. The practice of Cuong Nhu can be characterized as a traditional martial arts setting. Further details of this setting will emerge through the interpretive inquiry. We joined the Cuong Nhu martial arts club at a large state university in the southeastern United States. Approval from instructors and leadership of the club was contingent upon fully unobtrusive measures of observation only. The only individuals associated with the club who were aware of our study were

two instructors and the club president. Since our aim was not to extrapolate meaning from actual participants but rather to study the recreational sport setting and philosophical teaching, we elected to move forward with the study. We paid our club dues and began training with the club. Upon completion of 1-3 two-hour training sessions per week (attendance at training sessions was dependent upon various factors including academic course load as graduate students, holidays, gym schedules, etc.), each researcher recorded field notes for 10-15 minutes. Each researcher recorded notes for eighteen different training sessions, and the study was concluded after one academic semester or approximately four months. Open and axial coding was conducted to analyze themes emerging from the field notes.

INTERPRETATION

PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

To those people unfamiliar with the underlying philosophy of traditional martial arts, the practice may be misconstrued as a violent form of sport that socializes aggression, but advocates for traditional martial arts such as Cuong Nhu would argue for the exact opposite. One of the core tenets of traditional martial arts is unity of mind and body. Ethics and philosophy are seamlessly integrated into the teaching of Cuong Nhu oriental martial arts.

One of the instructors was a twenty-five year, black-belt veteran of martial arts training who believed balance was the key to offsetting competitive sport training that may potentially be interpreted by students as aggressive in nature. This particular instructor philosophized during one of the first training sessions:

Why, or rather what is one reason that we teach both philosophy and practice? Because if I am going to teach you how to break a person's arm or neck in self-defense, I better also teach you balance with a philosophy of betterment of self to prevent making you into an animal. I could make you into an animal, no problem, but providing a balance,

hard/soft, ying/yang, that is way more challenging.

The teaching of Cuong Nhu for this particular club was predominantly non-competitive. Although opportunities did exist to compete in tournaments, this aspect was not emphasized, and the prevailing ethic was to treat the opponent as a dance partner rather than as an enemy. This mentality balanced the realization that techniques being taught could be used in self-defense to physically hurt and thwart an attacker. This realization required students to look within and develop an ethic that the techniques be used only when absolutely necessary.

PERSONAL MEANING THROUGH PARTICIPATION

In addition to the added benefit of two observers, the respective sport backgrounds of the two researchers were vastly different and provided an intriguing juxtaposition that produced richer psychological data than originally anticipated when the study was commissioned. The primary sport background of researcher A¹ consisted of competitive team sport (American football and baseball), dual sport (wrestling and racquetball), and individual sport (snowboarding) environments; whereas, researcher B's sport background consisted primarily of individual sport (swimming) and sport fitness (jujitsu, karate, yoga, Pilates) environments.

Although initially excited about the prospect of training to learn a new sport or physical skill, researcher A suffered a calf injury during an unrelated physical activity that limited participation in martial arts training only a week into the study. Researcher A continued to participate but fell behind other participants in physical skill acquisition. This setback, while frustrating from a physical perspective, did not diminish the philosophical teachings derived from training sessions, and these life lessons were more evident in the field notes of researcher A than actual physical skills. Researcher A stated:

The sensei spoke of five pillars of Cuong Nhu as living, giving, caring, sharing, and loving. Live your philosophy, give to your philosophy, care about your philosophy deeply, share your philosophy in deep commitment, and love your philosophy with all your heart and soul.

This statement provides a glimpse into the philosophical reflections taught by the instructors and repeated by both researchers in field notes. Yet, perhaps more telling from a research perspective was the psychological reflection by each researcher in examining our respective inner drives towards achievement.

The original intent of the study was, as stated previously, to closely examine a seemingly aggressive recreational sport setting in martial arts that teaches a principled philosophy concurrently with a physical skill. Yet, qualitative research is by its very nature more inductive, and personal psychological themes emerging from each researcher provided insight into the achievement orientation associated with sport participation. We fully recognize limitations inherent within this mode of research, as despite intentions to the contrary, researcher A was in the midst of studying achievement-oriented variables. This factor contributed to the potential for a deductive rather than inductive nature to the research, as researcher A looked for explanation to psychological constructs being experienced firsthand. Nevertheless, the orientation of researcher B was reflected in the following statement from field notes:

I think one thing this class has been great with is helping me be less critical of myself...or less embarrassed by what other people think...maybe both. I just know that class is so much more enjoyable when I let my mistakes slide off my back.

Researcher A responded less favorably after suffering the initial calf injury, and this final entry in field notes showed the evident frustration. Researcher A stated, "Negativity crept in and swelled,

overcoming me and creating a dark chasm difficult to stem. I despise the feeling of being less competent than others. I dread every minute of martial arts."

Training in traditional martial arts such as Cuong Nhu promotes an inward orientation in which participants strive to accomplish personal goals. The ultimate accomplishment is earning a black belt, which signifies that a student has reached a certain level of personal mastery. Yet, researcher B responded favorably to this setting, whereas researcher A did not. What was the primary difference? We believe the preceding statements were reflective of one of the themes emerging from the research, one represented by a dichotomy of intrinsic motivation or task-oriented achievement orientation (researcher B) versus extrinsic motivation or ego-oriented achievement orientation (researcher A). This psychological interpretation of achievement has been researched extensively in sport settings and termed achievement goal theory (AGT).

The core principle of AGT, as it relates to sport, is an individual's perception of competence and subjective meaning placed on success and failure (Nicholls, 1989). Individuals have been shown to possess varying degrees of both ego and task orientations towards goal motivation in achievement settings. In task orientation, the individual is more likely to engage in adaptive achievement strategies that promote mastery of the task, and improvement is the goal rather than normative ranking. King and Williams (1997) found support for task orientation being fostered through traditional martial arts with results reflecting a positive correlation between task orientation and both satisfaction and performance with the sport. As demonstrated in field notes of researcher A, ego orientation emphasizes the display of competence or demonstration of ability with more of a focus being placed on normative ranking compared to peers (Roberts, 2001). The relevance of the difference

¹With two researchers serving as participant observers, we recognize that anonymity is neither possible nor necessary. However, utilizing the labels "Researcher A" and "Researcher B" allowed not only for blind peer review but more of a natural flow to the interpretation.

between task orientation versus ego orientation relates to the developmental outcomes and beliefs associated with each and was summarized succinctly by Duda and Ntoumanis (2005):

Task orientation is related to the belief that sports participation should foster cooperation, the value of striving for mastery, skill development, and lifetime health. In contrast, ego orientation is positively related to beliefs that sport should enhance social status, self-importance and career mobility, and is negatively related to the view that sport should foster good citizenship. (p. 319)

Most of the research on AGT has centered on youth and adolescents. Although the researchers for the current study were adult participants, an examination of our respective sport backgrounds and orientation toward achievement in a sport setting such as traditional martial arts provides potential relevance for youth sport settings. We are not suggesting extrapolation based solely on this participant observation, but rather that the potential exists for lessons learned to be applied to youth settings in an effort to further understand and promote exploratory research with youth sports.

DISCUSSION

Four major themes emerged from interpretive inquiry into traditional martial arts: 1) importance of a philosophical and principled ethic underlying an aggressive sport; 2) power of leadership in conveying ethics and lessons; 3) intentionality with connection between physical skill and life lessons; and 4) state of the participant (i.e., motivation, pre-existing conditions, sport background, etc.). These themes individually and collectively provide insight that may help recreational and athletic administrators reform the structure of aggressive or high contact sport settings such as American football. Yet, any mention of reform comes with a potentially defensive stance from some sport advocates who decry efforts at reform as veiled attempts to change the competitive nature of sport. These

advocates must be convinced that reform can impact sport in a positive manner if implemented properly.

If research shows increased retention and developmental benefits for individuals with task-oriented achievement motivation, a focus on task orientation may be one component to counterbalance competitive sport. Yet, promotion of task orientation alone may not provide that counterbalance without an underlying and intentional philosophical ethic. For competitive and aggressive youth sport settings such as American football, that ethic would involve teaching non-violence, non-aggression, cooperation, and physical restraint. These principles are seemingly at odds with the very nature of the sport and western ideals propagated by a capitalistic society. However, on and off field violent episodes have marred sports at all levels, and coaches have the opportunity to be effective leaders in working to counterbalance these aspects.

Potential benefits may be manifested both on and off the field of play. For example, an American football coach who teaches aggressive play while counterbalancing that lesson with one of self-restraint and judgment could apply lessons both on and off the field. Referees penalize football players who tackle an opposing player after their whistle or after the opposing player steps out of bounds. Therefore, self-restraint and good judgment are rewarded in those situations. An effective coach could apply that lesson to real life using any number of scenarios where an individual is faced with a decision to resort to violence but instead practices self-restraint. A closer examination is warranted and begs the following question: If the very nature of the sport lends itself to on-field violence, aggression, competition, and unbridled freedom, is it irresponsible and potentially destructive to teach these tenets without an intentional counterbalance? We believe that answer is clear, but a singular focus on winning is the message that often overrides all others.

As noted by Leonard (1998), "In Western sport, *winning* is synonymous with *success*" (p. 125). This statement represents the prevailing philosophical

ethic for most competitive team sport environments in the United States. Nonetheless, success in life is much more complex than winning or losing. Likewise, success on the playing surface is often more complex than the respective talent levels of the teams. Many times the best sport teams exhibit what is commonly referred to as *team chemistry*. In essence, team chemistry is the development of a counterbalance between competition and cooperation. Competition exists within teams, not only between teams. With virtually every team and every sport, players compete against each other for the most favorable positions on the team – the starting positions. The best coaches convince each and every team member that their role is vital, whether the player "wins" the position that was most desired or not. By doing so, the coach is integrating positive competition and cooperation within teams. The basic lesson of teamwork is pervasive when sport advocates assert sport's place in development, yet the lesson may have become somewhat lost in the pressure to win.

Shields and Bredemeier (1996) supported integration of competition and cooperation in advocating for a more counterbalanced approach to the delivery of sport and lamented the antithetical notion of the two constructs that has evolved in 21st century sport.

One problem with the way that competition is usually understood by competitors and spectators is that competition is thought to exist in a simple bipolar relation with cooperation: If a situation is competitive than [sic] it cannot also be cooperative. But competition can be viewed as a process whereby competitors seek to enhance their own performance and enjoyment through meeting the challenge posed by a worthy competitor. The root meaning of competition is "to strive with" not "to strive against." (p. 379)

This interpretation of competition aligns perfectly with the traditional martial arts ethic taught through Cuong Nhu. As participants on the first day of practice were taught by the instructor,

"The word 'arts' is included in 'martial arts' for a reason. Without our partner, we would be lost. Martial arts is a dance, not a fight."

Dichotomies are omnipresent in American and global society and take many forms – Democrat versus Republican, religious versus secular, Carolina versus Duke. Social science research is no exception. Scholars are not immune in grappling with polarized perspectives or paradigms – positivism versus interpretivism, communism versus capitalism, competition versus cooperation. As denoted in these examples, most of the time dichotomies are described with the word *versus*, which symbolizes a fight or struggle. The connotation is antagonistic and promotes defensiveness, fear, and/or division on both sides of the issue or debate. This notion stems from a world believing that competition is inherent to our existence as humans. In this world, war is inevitable as people are forced to choose sides rather than learn to respect differing opinions, religions, cultures, constructs, and even rival football teams.

When these dichotomies are highlighted on the playing surface, particularly with competitive and aggressive team sports such as American football, the underlying message is one of the opponent as enemy. That enemy stands in the way of winning; and therefore, must be defeated by any means necessary. Don McPherson (as cited in Whiteside, 2006), executive director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University, reflected upon high-profile violent episodes during intercollegiate football games:

If you go into a football game and you're there to have a healthy competition, then when faced with confrontation, you're more likely to say, "Let's move on, I want to get back to playing." As opposed to if you're there to protect your turf and win at all costs, then you're going to be more likely to succumb to the challenge of a cheap shot or trash talking. Then it's not about the game, it's about winning the masculinity battle, the tough-guy battle, and when that becomes more important than the game, that's when those

things [fights] happen. (¶ 5)

A different system is possible and plausible and may indeed be the path towards world peace, as greed is replaced by cooperation and humanity often seen on a widespread basis only in times of crises. If this ideal is ever to approach reality, we must begin a conscious and widespread effort devoted to teaching all children universal principles related to intrinsic motivation, cooperation, character, and caring in a more overt manner. The type of paradigmatic shift necessary to foster such a vast and dynamic undertaking has been in motion and gained considerable traction in the last decade through the study of youth and developmental psychology or youth development. The next step must be industry-driven, as sport administrators at all levels make a commitment to change and begin balancing the ethic of competition and aggression taught through sports like American football. The traditional teaching of martial arts may very well be a model for development of just such an ethic.

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