

Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport



Accord Partiel Élargi sur le Sport



Ethics and sport in Europe

Dominique Bodin and Gaëlle Sempé



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Dominique Bodin and Gaelle Sempé

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Foreword

Reconciling ethics and sport is crucial

Compliance with the ethics which provide sport with its underlying values is now open to question. Sport faces problems of corruption, violence, drug taking, extremism and other forms of discrimination, but this is nothing more than a reflection of the societies in which it takes place. If, however, sport is to continue to benefit individuals and societies, it cannot ignore these scourges or the ethical values it draws on.

Like the Olympic movement, which upholds the integrity and universal educational values of healthy physical activity, numerous sports organisations and government institutions are engaged in a battle for ethics in sport, whether it is practised as a professional or leisure activity. The 11th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport, held in Athens on 11 and 12 December 2008, confirmed the prime role of the Council of Europe and its Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) in the new challenges facing sports ethics. The political impetus provided was reiterated on 16 June 2010 by the Committee of Ministers, when it adopted an updated version of the Code of Sports Ethics, in Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)9 to member states, emphasising the need for co-ordination between governments and sports organisations.

Alongside these institutional developments, research scientists from numerous fields (philosophy, history, sociology, sports sciences, biology, etc.) have been analysing the concept of sports ethics. The open and often critical approach taken by these academics and institutions has cast new light on a subject with very firm historical and philosophical foundations. It is now clear from all the work done that sport does not intrinsically bring with it the values and ethics that the greatest optimists had thought. As the media reveals to us what actually goes on in sport, and in view of the difficulties encountered by the practitioners of sport, it is now agreed that governance and regulations need to change.

Following the ministerial conference in Athens, EPAS stepped up its work on sports ethics. *Inter alia*, with the Human and Social Sciences Research Laboratory and Anthropology and Sociology Laboratory (LARES-LAS) at the University of Rennes 2, it held an international conference attended by political leaders, sportspersons, researchers and voluntary sector officials.

Some of the experiences described at the conference and the thoughts that it prompted have been included in this publication. All the writers share the same concern: that the end result should be practical action – particularly in terms of the setting of standards – fully within the remit of EPAS, giving a real boost to the promotion of the values of the Council of Europe.

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Introduction

Ethics and sport in Europe

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The idea that sport has inherent ethical values prized by society has been circulating widely for over a century now. Historians and sociologists who examine the gilt-edged monument which sport's "eternal values" symbolise in the collective conscience may perceive the influence of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The idea has become something of a skilful ruse, whose cultural, moral and ideological foundations, as well as discriminatory social outlook, are rarely questioned. It has been nurtured over time, built on by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), reverently taken up by most of the media, and given impetus by certain schools of educational thought. Through the 20th century, sport has come to be seen as a naturally virtuous activity which rises above the vicissitudes of everyday life, even as the hopes of an entirely unblemished world of sport, free in particular of political manipulation, have been eroded.

The contented purring of the media and the message from the streets, particularly during major competitions or symbolic meetings (including the Olympic Games), should be enough to show how much critical mass this idea has now accumulated. Sport has to be a "good thing" as it embodies rules, virtue, respect for others and oneself, and provides reference points and an almost innate means of controlling human emotions and behaviour. In short, sport is considered to be covered by an almost timeless ethical code.

In truth, the association of ethics and sport conceals a major social and political problem, one of whose less apparent features – for good reason – is precisely the ideological nature of the message, put over with such force that this instrumental pairing appears obvious.

However, this is not the only problem. The corollary of this ideological issue is a question concerning definition. What in fact do we mean by "sport"? What does this over-determined concept cover? While the concept of ethics does not really require any direct clarification (although we will return to it later), the concept of sport has an ambiguous background. Its very history and the diverse theories as to its origins, particularly in terms of continuity,

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change and its place in society, are such that considerable caution is called for when drawing conclusions from an analysis of patterns of physical activity and their genealogy.

Even if we take account of those factors which define sport and its emanations as a historically and socially grounded activity, the ties between ethics and sport, or more specifically professional and/or high-level sport, are more an article of faith or an incantation than established fact. The received ideas and laudatory presuppositions which surround sport, in all its passion, brilliance and seductive spectacle, may in many cases conceal the exercise of power, make light of real problems of exclusion or segregation, and hide manifestations of dominance, violence, cheating and corruption. Sport has in many instances fallen far short of the "ethical" goals which are almost automatically assigned to it, at least in theory.

However, when talking in such terms, are we not simply raising the question of what is "normal" and what is "abnormal", in other words standards commonly accepted by a particular group but regarded as deviations by another group or, more simply, the dominant one?

Ethics and sport: the quarrels of an old couple

In recent times, we have witnessed doping in cycling, particularly during the Tour de France, and in athletics, match-fixing in football in the Italian Series A and also in Marseille, France, investment by the Russian mafia in international professional football, the stabbing of a woman tennis player and the doping and poisoning of other players, hooliganism at football matches but also at water-polo, cricket and basketball, cheating surrounding the marking in figure-skating judging, athletes forced to take part in competitions despite having serious injuries, racketeering, vote-catching, harassment and exclusion in the sphere of sports. This is by no means an exhaustive list,⁵ so how then do we go about linking ethics and sport? Is merely asking the question, let alone answering it, a utopian conceit?

It may be tempting to criticise these examples by pointing out that they mostly relate to professional sport or sport at the highest level. However, this would be to overlook the reports of the French Doping Prevention and Control Council (CPLD), which show that doping also occurs in amateur sport, and at a very young age. It would overlook the violence that occurs in amateur football, which has prompted leagues and committees to ban certain small-town clubs from competition in the lowest divisions.⁶ It would be forgetting that some

5. Bodin D., Robène L., and Héas S. (2005), *Sport and violence in Europe*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

6. For example, the Cussac Fort Médoc football club, representing a village in the Gironde, France, with 800 inhabitants, was banned from competition for the whole of the 2004/05 season.