

AN EDU-ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE NATURE OF TRUTH: CASE STUDIES IN ELITE YOUTH SPORT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research is to describe truth as ethical dilemma in youth sport, based on the frame of reference of the ethical-educational objective structure, and the essences and meaningful coherence as non-negotiable essential features thereof (Landman, Barnard, Gerber, Roos, Van der Westhuizen & Smit, 1978). Two case studies were selected. The participants were a fourteen year old female track-and-field sprinter (Athlete X) and a sixteen year old cyclist (Athlete Y) who were found guilty of using banned substances. Data were recorded by means of a semi-structured interview (Giorgi, 1970; Wertz, 1985). The value of this method was to describe experiences and perceptions of people who act in close proximity to the truth. It is concluded that sport officials who are instrumental in the administration of banned substances to elite athletes manage sport with hidden agendas and are engulfed by egocentric avarice, power, fame and success without any consideration for the negative effects their actions have on the athletes' morals and health. In essence this is a misleading and distorted view of sportsmanship. The founding of truth as a moral value calls into existence a permanent and positive value structure which might serve as a frame of reference for the actualisation of a code of conduct for all role players in sport.

Key words: Truth; ethical-educational perspective; youth sport; banned substances.

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INTRODUCTION

An appreciation of sport can be judged from the perspectives of an *ideal* or of *reality*.

Lumpkin, Stoll and Beller (2003) describe this difference from the concepts of motives, intentions and actions: the *motives* of sport as an ideal are characterised as striving towards excellence. In reality, they manifest as a striving to win-at-all-costs. The underlying *intentions* of sport as an ideal are striving towards the realisation of sportsmanship. In reality, they actually are about gamesmanship with strategies of, for example, deceit and cheating. *Actions* of sport as an ideal are also focussed on establishing dominance through excellence as opposed to winning by causing physical, emotional and mental harm. The motives, intentions and actions of sport as an ideal are a frame of reference in which truth is embedded as moral value. Truth is the fundamental idea, basis and prerequisite for participation in sport. True and sincere sportsmanship, as described in the ethical sport code, manifest itself as a principle of truth. This is the educational ideal which is pursued as a justifiable objective of youth sport participation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Upon examination of parents' perceptions of their young daughter's

Athlete X) conviction on charges of taking banned substances in track and field, it was found that proof of innocence (the truth) remains an unfulfilled ideal (Van Wyk & Steyn, 2004).

In a similar case, a sixteen year old male cyclist (Athlete Y) tested positive to the use of the hormone Eprex (Erythropoietin: r-HuEPO). Although he could not explain the presence of the substance in his body, he was suspended from participation for one year. He has continued to proclaim his innocence. The overarching similarities in the above-mentioned cases lie in the principle of truth in which the search for and proof of truth formed the basis for events. This is the point of departure for the present study.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the investigation was to descriptively analyze the essence of truth as a moral value from an educational-ethical frame of reference. This was also a conditional possibility for sportsmen to achieve success. Posing an educational frame of reference for truth as a moral value serves as a guideline toward the

understanding of ethical sport behaviour.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Two case studies (in youth sport that tested positively to banned substances) and interviews were used in this qualitative research. Data was analysed based on the methodology of Giorgi (1970) and Wertz (1985). This method is deemed appropriate for this study as it describes the experiences and perceptions of people who act in close proximity to the truth. The interview was semi-structured and recorded on tape.

The over-arching construct that became apparent from the above cases was the parents' convictions as well as their attempts to prove the athletes' innocence. The essence of truth, as based on relevant and applicable information gained from these case studies, can be described in an educational sport ethically grounded frame of reference of the objective structure, the essences as well as the coherence thereof. The educational objective is an irrefutably essential characteristic or generally applicable condition for grounds or foundations of the general educational and learning situation (Landman, Barnard, Gerber,

Roos, Van der Westhuizen & Smit, 1978). Youth sport is an educational and learning experience in which moral development can also be featured. This pedagogical frame of reference also describes the essence of truth as a moral value which should be pursued in coaching. In essence, a sport code of ethics is the ideal all participants associate with in the participation of sport.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Martens (2004) indicated that the success of coaching is determined by a coach's philosophy and that important decisions can be made from a philosophical approach in order to achieve an objective. There are three main objectives set as ideals by parents and coaches for athletes: (1) the striving to experience *fun and enjoyment*; (2) the holistic *development* of the athlete and (3) the development of an athlete's *competitiveness*.

These three objectives and the ideal perspective on sport (as described by Lumpkin, *et al*, 2003), constitute the structure and basis of the educational - ethical frame of reference in which the truth as moral value can be described:

Objectives 1 and 2: Enjoyment and development in youth sport

In this study the parents' educational objective for their children was focussed on the realisation of enjoyment and development. The parents also regarded the education and bringing up of children as beneficial to the child and nothing that was harmful or detrimental would be allowed. The health, safety and well-being of children were priorities.

Objective 3: The motive of achievement in youth sport

Martens (2004) maintained that success (winning) is an important component of competition, but the focus should rather be on striving for success based on a sense of enjoyment. A critical question lies in the value that parents and coaches place on winning. Two types of values (approaches) are allocated on winning:

Value 1: Striving for and experiencing success as a pedagogically accountable ideal in youth sport

The athlete's well-being should be the primary focus in youth sport, the secondary outcome is winning.

Coaches are encouraged not to succumb to the pressures of achievement and abandon the values and principles of healthy participation and coaching (Martens, 2004). In the present study the parent's educational objectives and perspectives on participation in sport for their child (*Athlete X*) were as follows:

"We encouraged her to participate in as many sports as possible: swimming, netball and athletics. She really enjoyed it – her days were full. We regarded this as very important – she must enjoy her sport" (Father).

It is clear that *Athlete X*'s parent's general attitude towards physical activity is that such activity should be a contributing factor to their child's harmonious growth and development. *Athlete X*'s introduction to a variety of sports is an ideal approach in contrast to an approach of early specialisation (Potgieter, 2003). The parent's wish for their child to experience joy in life lies within the *enjoyment* of a variety of sports – as an individual or as part of a team. According to Feezel (1995), enjoyment is a very important aspect of competitive participation – even more so in youth sport. The parent's educational propensity towards participation in sports can thus be regarded as positive – enhancing the

child's harmonious growth and development.

Against this background the parent's motivation for achievement can be described:

"She never felt that she had to achieve because her grandparents or other family members would be present – something we never encouraged either".

The parent's attitude reveals an approach in which success was not the main reason for participation. Striving for absolute success was never present.

Value 2: Negative manifestation of success as absolute motive for achievement

When there is too much emphasis on achievement, striving towards and realisation of aims and objectives manifest in negative ways which is cause for alarm and concern. Siedentop (2002) warned that when winning overshadows the other reasons for participation in sport (such as enjoyment and development), it becomes a charge against adult value judgements of winning. In this regard Rowley (1986:92) refers to the parent whose value judgement on achievement is the following:

“Overly involved and exceeds his or her functions by pressuring the child to participate and achieve and who sets unrealistic goals and who regards success as the absolute goal”.

Poor sportsmanship is a result of the absolutisation of the winning ideal. An athlete or a team realises that goals set (any form of success such as winning) cannot be achieved through normative participation. Fear and negative experiences of failure force participants to act in an un-sportsmanlike fashion, which is in total breach of the harmonious and orderly course of competition. The use of banned substances in sport forms part of the overemphasis of the winning motive which results manifests in athletes’ unlawful use of chemical-pharmaceutical substances which enhance the psycho-motor and or physiological abilities to a level at which the athlete would not normally optimally achieve. The two case studies will now be discussed with regard to the motive of winning:

CASE STUDY 1: ATHLETE X – TRACK AND FIELD: *Guilty for the use of Nandrolone and Fencamfamine*

This investigation refers to *Athlete X* who, as a fourteen year old, tested positive for the use of the *anabolic steroid*, Nandrolone (Deca-Durabolin) and for the *stimulant*, Fencamfamine

(Reactivan) at the South African Primary School Athletics Championships.

The immediate reaction of all those involved (parents and athlete) was one of denial and innocence. One might argue that denial would in any case be the first natural reaction (Potgieter, 2003).

In the hearing and the explanation of the plea, *Athlete X* (Affidavit, 1997) pleaded *guilty* on the charge of using the *stimulant Fencamfamine* (Quotation 7). The parents provided the prohibited substance and accepted full responsibility for their actions. The substance was not taken in order to improve achievement, but to relieve *Athlete X*’s feelings of listlessness and lack of vitality. The parents unwittingly broke the rules. Neither the parents nor the athlete ever tried to refute this verdict. They broke the rules and regulations and accepted the full implication of the negative sanctions (punishment) (*justice*).

Athlete X pleaded *not guilty* to the charge of the use of the *anabolic steroid Nandrolone*. In defence she provided the following rationale:

“(a) *The most terrible was that I honestly, honestly did not know how the substance came to be present in my body*” (Quotation 6). (b) *...but I swore under oath that – to my knowledge – I never drank or have been injected with steroids...*” (Quotation 7). “*Until this day I still have no idea as to how these steroids entered my body. If I had known I would have told!*” (Quotation 9).

At this point it is necessary to give an explanation and description of the background on which the not-guilty plea was based. The situation is described from the evidence delivered before the Disciplinary Tribunal of Athletics South Africa (1995b):

Athlete X declares that her coach suggested that she took vitamins and be injected with Vitamin B₁₂ (Lines 12-15:123). According to her coach, the reason for this course of action was the fact that the exercises took much out of her body and that the body needed to be replenished in order for her to keep on practising, or else exhaustion would have been experienced after two weeks (Lines 15-20:124). On her coach’s suggestion, she received Vitamin B₁₂ injections from a specific pharmacist (Lines 13-15:125) where most of the other athletes also received their injections (Lines 15-16:130). *Athlete X* received

one injection per week for a period of two years (Lines 5-7:128) and, as in the case of the other athletes, *never paid for these* (Lines 2-4:134). The free injections were part of sponsorship by the pharmacy. *ATHLETE X* also received Vitamin B-Complex injections from a physician, as, according to the physician, these injections contained more vitamins than the B₁₂ injection (Lines 10-15:127). She had received at least *three injections* (Lines 21-22:128).

By signing a sports code she acknowledges her understanding of and agreement to the code (Athletics South Africa, 1995a). The parents tried to prove that the substances were not used deliberately in order to improve performance.

In her evidence *ATHLETE X* also declared that she had no knowledge of how the substances had entered her body (as described in Affidavit, 1997, Annexure 6, 7 and 9).

It is against this background that the guilty verdict by the Disciplinary Tribunal of Athletics South Africa (1995b) is questioned due to a lack of evidence:

“It should not be Athlete X standing before us (meaning giving evidence), but someone else, an adult who should have known better, who had committed a criminal offence by allowing the steroids to enter her body. Such a person should stand before us so that the real offender can be punished” (Lines 20-27:165).

CASE STUDY 2: ATHLETE

Y -CYCLING: *Guilty for the use of Eprex (EPO)*

This case study refers to *ATHLETE Y* who tested positive to the use of Eprex (Erythropoietin), at the South African under Sixteen Cycling Tour. This drug is a purified glycoprotein which stimulates erythropoiesis. To date, this athlete is the youngest cyclist in the history of the sport who was found guilty of such a crime. The cyclist was banned from the sport for one year – the sentence was suspended for two years. *Athlete Y’s* reaction was as follows:

“I experienced many emotions and heartache that I couldn't understand because I knew that I didn't do anything wrong” (Personal Interview, 31 January 2005).

As in *Athlete X’s* case, one must take prior events into consideration in order to evaluate *Athlete Y’s* situation. The events are closely related to *Athlete X’s* health. Three weeks before the tour *Athlete Y* became ill. A physician found that the athlete’s red blood cell count was low. A Vitamin B-Complex was administered intravenously. An

oral iron supplement was also prescribed. The team manager administered Vitamin B-supplements intramuscularly (De Sward, 2005b).

From the description of athlete and parent's perceptions, the search for the truth underlies this case, just as in the case of *Athlete X*. In an attempt to prove his innocence, *Athlete Y* agreed to a polygraph test in order to prove the validity of his statements. The result from this test was that the athlete, his father and the team manager were *innocent*. The events have reached a point where the truth is still not known and the athlete has to bear the brunt (De Sward, 2005c).

This brings to focus *the health of the athlete within the frame of reference of the ethical code of conduct in sport*. The case studies represented are shrouded in uncertainty, as all concerned did not testify in the quest to find the truth. If the health issue is used to unlawfully manipulate the motive of achievement, the athlete is misguided. This is a charge of untruthfulness, falseness and deceit. This implies that all negative principles that underlie truth and innocence are now revealed.

As a conditional possibility of reliability, all role players should commit themselves to a relationship based on trust, understanding and authority. As a result, parents will not question a coach or manager's judgements or intentions when it is suggested that an athlete be examined by a physician for illness, or that a physician prescribe medications for the improvement of the athlete's general well-being.

Should it happen that banned substances are unlawfully administered to an athlete, it is only natural that the athlete and the parents will question the viability of sport as well as the meaning of life. The course of reality is fostered by motives, intentions and actions founded in truth. If it is not truth, the aim is based on untruths or alternative motives and negative behaviour.

Against this background it seems as though the coaching situation is removed from the objectives and ideals of sport. Landman (Personal Interview, June 2005) maintained that it is not necessary for coaching as an educational skill to be viewed negatively. Coaching implies guidance and support in a pedagogically

responsible way in view of the philosophically founded objectives that underlie the education of athletes. When the motive of achievement gives rise to negative manifestations such as the *absolutisation* of success, coaching no longer adheres to the norm of pedagogical accountability and, therefore, no longer belongs in the make up of an educationalist. The goal of and way in which coaching is applied should still satisfy the demands of pedagogical accountability. This is what Castelyn, Söhnge, Stone and Steyn (1978) warn against, that coaching could also be non-educational: it is possible to guide an athlete in a wrong direction, towards slanted personal development and irresponsibility. This cannot be called education, and the educational event is a falsehood.

CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of the study lies in the dispute of sport officials' administration of banned substances as a misguided motive, disguise and shallow concern for the health and wellbeing of youth athletes. Truth as a moral value is cloaked in the form of cheating and lying. When truth is abused, reality can be perceived as worthless, meaningless and tainted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The founding of truth as a moral value calls into existence a permanent and positive value structure which might serve as a frame of reference for the actualization of a code of conduct for all those involved in sport. In cases like these, educators should work together cooperatively to guide young athletes to experience the moral values under the over-arching construct of truth. The recommendations of this study are focussed on the principles of the *PRO-ACTIVE* and the *CONSEQUENTIAL*:

The *PRO-ACTIVE* principle focuses on the prevention of negative manifestations of the striving for achievement in sport.

The following are recommendations: FIRST, parents must determine each role player's philosophical sports framework. The coach's goal, for example, is to create harmony between achievement, enjoyment and development of the athlete. Those who strives for absolute achievement in sport and make use of banned substances to reach such objectives, threatens and destroys the ideals of sport and humanity. Officials should commit themselves to the realisation of the

code of conduct – that is the prerequisite determined by all codes of conduct in sports. SECOND, the coach must strive toward the prevention of the use of banned substances. The theoretical sports ethical code must be applied in practice. In this regard Cox (2002) suggests two strategies (cognitive and behavioural techniques) that should influence the athlete and the environment to such an extent that the use of banned substances to improve achievement is not even considered.

With reference to the *CONSEQUENTIAL* principle the emphasis is on accountability and guidance. FIRST, all role players should assume accountability for the athlete who is in an ethical dilemma. Adults should participate in developing the helpless dependent athlete's potential. SECOND, the guidance principle is relevant within the consequential framework. The greatest disadvantage of the above-mentioned events was the negative influence on relationships.

Psychological guidance to parents and athletes in similar situations is suggested so that the value and meaning of sport can be put into perspective once again. Lynch (2001) refers to the stabilising of experiences which is a specific act of guidance towards emotional stability: in this investigation it would have been of great value to the athletes as well as the parents, because the extent and intensity of the circumstances were typically aversive.

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