

Sustainable Development and Fair Play in Sport and Physical Education: A Critical Perspective

Emese Ivan
St John's University, NY
ivane@stjohns.edu
Carla Vidoni
University of Louisville, KY
carla.vidoni@louisville.edu

Keywords: UN Sustainable Development Goals, Sport for Development, Fair Play

Introduction

The General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) on July 1st 2024 adapted – anonymously - to mark World Fair Play Day on May 19th each year. In its announcement to the press the UN stated that this initiative promotes an approach to reinforce sportsmanship and the values it represents, such as abiding by the rules, respecting the adversary and combating violence and doping. “We want the whole world to remember what fair play means. And remember that athletes hug after a competition even if they came from countries in war with each other” (UN Press Release, 05.2024).

One could be surprised why an international governmental organization like the UN would become involved with the idea of sportsmanship in general and the principles of fair play in particular. Recent history, however, shows that the UN has been involved with sport and physical activity (PA) related initiatives for a while, especially in the 21st century: starting with the establishment of the UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace in 2001 and naming the year of 2005 to be “The Year of Physical Education and Sport – focusing on what sport and physical education can do to make a world a better place.” (www.un.org) In 2010, the UN announced that its Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group is an inter-governmental policy initiative with an aim to promote the integration of Sport for Development and Peace policy and program recommendations into national and international development strategies of its member-states. As a result, the initiative led to a report, called “Rio+20” and was shared with all

UN delegates. In June 2012 at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a resolution titled “The Future We Want” was published. The UN decided to launch a long-lasting program to develop Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as well as measurements towards assessing the implementation and achievements of these originally announced goals. As a result, 7 out of the 17 SDGs contain a form of PA or sport as a tool to achieve desired UN SDGs. (www.un.org) Thus, one can argue that over the past two decades sport and physical education (PE) have found its way into UN resolutions and, accordingly and gradually, started to play an increasing role in the implementation of goals and in achieving and/or measuring the results of these new initiatives.

When in 1896 Baron Pierre the Coubertin – a physical educator himself - revived the modern Olympic Games, he set out to accomplish many goals, one of which was to bring the youth of the world together to compete in sport, specifically in the spirit of fair play. As organized sports have spread around the world, so has the myth that sport is essentially pure and good, and that its purity and goodness is transferred to all who participate in it – in the spirit of fair play. This myth supports the related belief that sport builds character, and that who plays it or participates in it will be a better person for doing so. Evidence clearly shows that merely participating in or consuming sports does not guarantee any particular outcome related to character development. In fact, we hear every day about cases that contradict this great sports myth. But that does not seem to weaken its uncritical acceptance by many people. As sport sociologist Coackley states: “In fact, when the actions of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others associated with sports are inconsistent with perceived inherent purity and goodness of sport, those who accept the myth dismiss them as exceptions” (Coackley, 2017).

The goal of this preliminary study is to critically analyze the state of fair play in sport and PE in the light of some recent developments. This paper aims to pay the attention of the broader academic community to the challenges that the sport community faces in the second decade of the 21st century. Our intention is to pose questions and start a - hopefully interdisciplinary - scholarly debate whether sport and PA live up to the 19th century values and expectations of sportsmanship and fair play even in the 21st century;

and whether we should be more aware of the challenges it faces if we still would like to use it as a universal tool in achieving broader societal goals such as social justice and/or sustainable development.

Purpose and Development of Fair Play in PE and Sport

To set the context of this study first we seek to showcase how the concept of fair play and sportsmanship has been perceived over time. Sportsmanship has always pretended to have a certain moral relevancy, although its precise place among the moral virtues has been uncertain. Distinguished advocates have made remarkable claims for sportsmanship as a moral category. Pope Pius XII speaking of fair play, which is widely regarded as an essential ingredient of sportsmanship – if not synonymous with it – said: “From the birthplace of sport came the proverbial phrase *fair play*, that knightly and courteous emulation, which raises the spirit above meanness and deceit and dark subterfuges of vanity and vindictiveness and preserves it from the excesses of a closed and intransigent nationalism. Sport is the school of loyalty, of courage, of fortitude, of resolution, and universal brotherhood” (1926). Albert Camus, Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1957 stated that it was from sports that he learned all that he knew about ethics (1961). Former President Hoover quoted as saying: “Next to religion, the single greatest factor for good in the United States in recent years has been sports (1951).”

Most historical introductions to the idea of fair play trace back to 19th century British Public School system and the Christian Masculinity movement that claims its roots in the classical Greek sports. In the mid-19th century, the term *fair play* did not need much detailed explanation. Sport was an activity of the elite: moneyed, educated, aristocratic, males – the gentlemen’s game. And gentlemen knew how to behave: no gentleman sportsman would go against the rules of the game and intentionally break them. These rules of the playing field also transcended and were carried over to other aspects of life. As a result, the philosophy of fair play – the philosophy of respect for one another and respect for the rules – started to be seen as an ideal principle of human relations not only in sport but also in business and other competitive endeavors (Renson, 2009).

As time passed by - and because of the democratization of sport - youth from a range of backgrounds have been admitted to PA and sport. Even women were allowed to participate. The broadening of participation base in PA and sport was both positive and healthy. However, it also resulted in new challenges, namely, what once was taken for granted now had to be explained, debated and even justified. And fair play has always been an applied concept. The content of fair play values – whether positive or negative - depends upon the way in which PA, PE, and sport is played, taught, and practiced. It is generally agreed that sport teaches values, and PE is still being perceived as an ideal setting for students' holistic development: where focus on positive values not only contribute to physical fitness but to development of attitude of fair play (Vidoni and Ward, 2009; Sekot, 2011) and restorative practices that aim to transform conflicts in schools (Hemphill, 2022).

However, past and present studies have also shown that these values are susceptible to different interpretations across different situations (Schneider 2018, Whitehead, 2011). Around the 1960s commercialization of sport introduced an entirely new behavioral approach to participation in PA and sport. Namely, and as Vince Lombardi so famously stated, winning became the only thing that matters. The struggle between moral consciousness – or amateur ideals - and commercial considerations – or professional attitude – of all participants, athletes, coaches, parents, spectators, managers, and everyone else connected became known, discussed, and debated or even judged (Schneider 2018, Morgan et al., 2020). With the worldwide media exposure of sporting events and growing popularity of athletes, fans learned about these struggles as latest news instantly, whether the issues were related to political turmoil, misogynistic principles, brutality, drug use, or racism. The new attitude of “winning at all means” took its first toll on human life at the Summer Olympic Games in Rome in 1960. A Danish cyclist died because of using prohibited performance enhancing substances. This shocking event awakened the sporting community to the dangers of doping as well as the violence and commercialism that started to become even more dominant in competitions. In Paris on December 5, 1963, representatives of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Sport Press Association (ISPA), International Committee for Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE),

and several international sport federations established the International Committee for the Organization of the Pierre de Coubertin Fair Play Awards. In 1965 the first World Fair Play Award Ceremony was held and the first Pierre de Coubertin Fair Play Trophy awarded to an Italian athlete. In 1973 the organization decided to change its name to the International Fair Play Committee (IFPC) but the objectives defined in its original By-Laws remained the same as those of the founders.

Currently, the IFPC defines fair play in the following ways: *fair play* as respect, as friendship, as team spirit, as equality, as integrity, as sport without doping, as solidarity, as tolerance, as care, as excellence, and as joy. (www.fairplayinternational.org) And going beyond the playing field the IFPC even states that fair play is not a theory. It teaches respect and tolerance to each other and can build a peaceful society. Moreover, fair play values give hope, pride, and identity and it may unite nationalities, politics, religions, and cultures that are often divided.

These statements align with social justice initiatives and are also in line with the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations where 7 out of the 17 SDGs can be cultivated through PE, PA, or sport (www.sdgs.un.org). Although society has changed and progressed in so many ways and so rapidly over the past decades it is notable that from one side, the idealistic values of fair play remain hopeful and applicable to social justice and sustainable development initiatives.

UN Sustainable Development Goals, PE, and Sport

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda outlines a new plan for global development with the ambition to transform our world by 2030. Central to the 2030 Agenda are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In preparation for this new era UN representatives, especially their Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, have consulted several stakeholders about the contribution Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) can make to this global agenda. The report on these consultations serves as guidance to governments, as well as a broad cross-section of

SDP stakeholders including sports organizations, civil society actors, and development agencies seeking to maximize the contribution sport-based approaches can make to sustainable development. Looking through the documents one can see a mandate to support member countries to advance SDP

(www.sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015). Through policy guidance, capacity building and direct technical assistance, the UN and its agencies support governments to strengthen policy frameworks, and to coordinate strategies to maximize the contribution sport-based approaches can make to national development priorities.

Through initial analysis and consultation activities, seven SDGs were identified as areas where sport-based approaches could make effective and cost-efficient contributions:

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all, at all ages

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17: The means of implementation and partnerships, positioned as a key cross-cutting goal relevant for all SDP stakeholders.

In 2016, Wilfred Lemke, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace in his article entitled *The Role of Sport in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals* provided specific and practical examples for each of the above-mentioned goals and the ways in which sport and PE can add and/or have already contributed to SDGs. He also stated: “Children and young people benefit tremendously from PA. Combined with a school curriculum, physical activities and sport are

necessary for a comprehensive education. Mega sport events can help advance social development, economic growth, health, education and environmental protection, especially if they are part of coherent and sustainable, long-term policies at the municipal, regional and national levels” (Lemke, 2016).

Discussion on Current Challenges to Fair Play in Sport and Beyond

As an ancient philosophical concept and theory, fair play has been a driving force and a moral compass in society. Teaching values and principles of fair play through PE classes and sport settings has been practiced since the 19th century. This overall trend has focused on teaching social, physical, and moral skills to understand what is “appropriate” or “not” in different PA settings and beyond. No question PA and sport have huge potential however, they still face many challenges to achieve fulfillment. Many treatments of sport and PA are motivated more by the desire to use any form of physical or sport education to teach some set of positive values than by the goal of understanding the nature of the underlying concept of fair play or sportsmanship itself. As Butcher and Schneider point out, often the underlying concept of fair play is the phrase used to capture the view that sport and physical activity *should be* used to teach positive social values (Butcher and Schneider, 2007).

Over the 20th century the democratization and commercialization of sport resulted in new highs for sport and PE in an influx of money, popularity, and worldwide media attention. It also presented the field with never-seen-before-feeding lows, such as early childhood specialization in PA, increase in performance enhancement, and growing gap in access to opportunities worldwide just to name a few. Turning our attention back to the idealistic values of sport and engaging in the ideas of sport for development and peace and sport for social justice seemed like the desired way to enter the 21st century. However, the new century had different plans for us. The worldwide pandemic and its aftermath, the war in the Ukraine followed by the escalated events in the Middle East led us to a new face in our postmodern society by transforming the conceptualization of fair play. One starts to wonder whether the academic community should open a dialogue about the ancient philosophical theory and educational concept of fair play and

its application to the realities of the 21st century. As Freire famously stated, “dialogue is not simply talking about people’s everyday lives, but a political tool aimed to unveil social practices” (1998). Sport, PE, and PA are also social practices. One practices these activities similarly as practices and interprets other social activities in life. If we see discrepancies between theory and practice, between ideals and actions, between promise and reality we might have to pause, ask questions, and reflect before moving forward. Let’s discuss a couple of situations that from the perspective of this study are worth further discussion.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges and obstacles regarding sports medicine and management. The discovery of this novel, a highly transmissible disease, has had potentially severe impacts on the health of the general population. When COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, a rapid, widespread shutdown of sports soon followed. This included cancellation or rescheduling for almost all professional and recreational sports organizations, as well as major events, such as the 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo. The novelty and reported severity of COVID-19 required a rapid response, and important decisions had to be made every day, even while new information emerged regarding transmissibility, at-risk populations, natural course of the illness, and medical management options.¹ As a starting point, sport organizations and governing bodies have an overriding rule of duty of care towards their participants. Clearly this duty of care will differ based on the sporting environment as well as the jurisdiction in which the sporting event is taking place. However, when sporting facilities and international competitions reopened slowly the debate started to evolve around two main questions: Can sports force participants to get vaccinated? Or if not, can they at least make vaccinations a pre-condition for participating? The idea of mandatory vaccination seemed as obvious and meant the fulfillment of the above-mentioned duty to the highest standards in a moral – and legal - sense this could cause significant risks to sport organizations. Making vaccines mandatory could be seen as limitation of participants right to choose; result in mishandling sensitive health-related information and data; and/or discrimination. Sport prides itself to be the big equalizer: no matter where you came from, what is your background, the color of your skin if you have the

best results you can win! Fair play demands equality in participation: equal access and rules for everyone. Denying participation based on medical condition or status of vaccination – that can be refused for example in lieu of religious beliefs – going against the basic principles of sportsmanship and fair play. Although several cases can be mentioned involving high profile athletes as well as issues at the level of grassroots organizations, the most publicized case occurred in January 2022 in Australia. Serbian tennis player, Novak Djokovic, was denied entry visa to Australia to compete at the Australian Open tournament. This study does not advocate for or against the State of Victoria Court’s decision. Our aim is to pay attention to the fact, that a tennis player who openly opposed vaccination was not permitted to compete in an international sporting event purely based on making that choice.

The controversy surrounding Qatar’s hosting of the Soccer World Cup, arose in relation to the country’s violations of human rights in general, and migrant workers’ right in particular. This issue persisted from 2010 until the conclusion of the tournament in 2022.² The discussion also incorporated a variety of other issues, including women’s rights and the rights of the LGBTQ community, as well as alcohol consumption, which – as some would argue - ultimately became the most prominent issue mentioned in the Western media. When FIFA prohibited players from wearing LGBTQ support slogans, particularly the “OneLove” armband, and threatened players who did so with punishment, there was an international uproar. The German players covered their mouths for their team photo in their first match with Japan in an apparent rebuke of FIFA’s decision. Even though in September 2022, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, assured the international community that football fans from the LGBTQ community would not face discrimination by the Qatari authorities he had to reiterate Qatar’s stance on this matter several times over the forthcoming weeks. In an interview with the German newspaper *Bild* he stated, “homosexuality cannot be practiced publicly, as it contradicts religious beliefs and is alien to the country’s culture, customs, and traditions” (Bild, 2022). Indeed, while the Western media considered the banning of alcohol and the refusal to display the slogan “OneLove” to be violations of the individual’s freedom of expression, many members of the Arab and Muslim audiences considered these same things to represent a firm commitment to their

religious beliefs and cultural values. The International Fair Play Committee's definition describes fair play as respect for each other, as integrity, as tolerance, as care. It also states that fair play by teaching respect and tolerance can build a peaceful and more just society and build bridges between divided communities. Analyzing the discrepancies in understanding what behavior is "appropriate" and what is "not" regarding the issues surrounding the World Cup in Qatar several questions arise: are we creating our own parameters of fair play? Do we follow a strict/old fashioned/idealistic view of fair play in some situations when in others we allow room for different interpretation? Should the acceptable definition of fair play be universal? Or does our postmodern society require multidimensional definition(s) of fair play depending on the broader social and political context? It seems like we have more questions than answers at the beginning of the 21st century.

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin's Russia announced a so-called special military operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine. The Russian invasion that followed was internationally condemned. Several countries have imposed sanctions against Russia while provided humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. The situation faced the international sport community, especially the International Olympic Committee (IOC) since the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing was just around the corner, with the need for an immediate decision: to ban or not to ban Russian athletes from international competitions. When one restricts an entire population – in our case a nation - from participating in an international (sporting) event for any reason it is worth considering the goal as well as the decision's unintended consequences.³ There are different kinds of sporting events and different stated reasons for a ban. There are varying political ramifications, marketing calculations, and moral considerations. Some of the international sport federations such as the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), International Soccer Federation (FIFA), and International Federation of Ice Hockey (IIHF) banned the Russian Teams from competitions at the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) first boxed out Russian and Belorussian players – whose country supported the Russian invasion – from some of their competition like Wimbledon, but at others like the Roland Garros in Paris or US Open in New York City allowed them to participate as

individual neutral athletes. Meaning, their national flag, anthem, and any relation to their nationality could not be mentioned or displayed. No question this issue was and is the ultimate test of sport's place in politics and, politics' place in sport. Can an athlete be *from* Russia/Belarus but not *for* Russia/Belarus? How much should governments' actions affect the playing field? Ignoring the invasion of Ukraine will be insensitive but the sporting world is also in danger by punishing innocent athletes. Some of the Russian athletes have spoken out against the invasion as well as if living abroad expressed heartfelt concerns for all Russian and Ukrainian people suffering because of the invasion. However, a new unintended consequence of the governing bodies' decisions in this matter started to manifest itself on the tennis courts. Russian and Belorussian players were allowed to compete. At competitive tennis tournaments opponents face each other as a result of random selection. Thus, Russian athletes could face Ukrainian opponents at the tournaments. Some of the Ukrainian tennis players declared that they would not shake hands of athletes from Russia and Belarus at the net after the completion of the match. Handshake with your opponent after a competition end is one of the most basic principles of sportsmanship. The most basic way to show respect for your opponent, respect for the written and unwritten rules of the game as well as to showcase one's character built by the teaching of fair play through sport and PE: be humble in victory and gracious in defeat. When participants are allowed to set aside these basic rules of sportsmanship and fair play and most importantly, they can do that on an elite international level we should start to wonder how we should approach teaching fair play in PE, PA, and youth sport settings from now on. Isn't it a paradox to use in numerous UN SDGs sport, PA, and PE as a tool to achieve goals when the next generations are faced with the reality of unfair behaviors as acceptable in different sport settings around the world? And finally, should the ethos of sport and/or athlete activism follow political power relations or should limits be imposed?

Conclusion and Further Research

Research demonstrates the benefits of using sport, PE, and PA in achieving social justice and sustainable development goals in different fields. This is reflected also by the UN SDGs, where 7 of the 17 listed goals refer – in one way or another – to PE, PA,

sport or games as a reliable tool engaging youth and children to achieve the desired results. Research also demonstrates that fair play is an essential component of PE and youth sport classes. It's associated with desirable behavior and effort that should be reinforced and taught in school and sport settings (Vidoni and Ward 2009). Most likely, the origins, history, and educational values of fair play make PE and sport so desirable for different organizations, including the UN, to use these disciplines to achieve their goals so widely.

The aim of this paper was to focus attention on the ongoing debate surrounding the basic concept of fair play in the PE, PA, and sport community. Most importantly, trying to pose the question and discuss the issue whether our postmodern society is witnessing the overall politicization of “the fair play concept” at the beginning of the 21st century? And if yes, make sure the broader academic community is aware of these existing challenges and struggles that affect the basic principles of sportsmanship and fair play. After all, the promise of these basic principles has made sport, PE, and PA so desirable for building character, communities, achieving overall sustainable development and social justice goals since the 19th century. This notion leaves us with plenty of opportunities for further research and discussion that we would continue exploring.

References

- Butcher & Schneider A.J. (2007). Fair Play as Respect for the Game. In Morgan, J.W. (eds) *Ethics in Sport*. Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL.
- Camus, A. (1961). *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. Knopi Inc. New York, NY.
- Coackley, J. (2017). *Sport and Society: Issues and Controversies*. McGraw-Hill New York, NY.
- Freire, (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civil courage*. New York, NY: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers.
- Hemphill, M.A., Lee, Y., Ragab, S., Rinker, J., & Dyson, O.L. (2022). Developing a pedagogy of restorative physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 41(2), 194-203.
- Leahy, F. (1951). *Defensive Football*. Prentice Hall Inc. New York, NY.

Lemke, W. (2016). The Role of Sport in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals. *UN Chronicle*, 2(LIII).

Morgan, J.W. (2007). *Ethics in Sport*. Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL.

Pope Pius XII. (1926). *The Human Body*. Daughters of St Paul. Boston, MA.

Renson, R. (2009). Fair play: its origins and meanings in sport and society. *Kinesiology*, 41(1), 5–18.

Schneider, A.J. (2018). “William J. Morgan on fair play, treatment versus enhancement and the doping debates in sport, sport ethics and philosophy. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 12(4), 386-400. DOI: 10.1080/17511321.2018.1497082

Sekot, A. (2011). Fair play in the perspective of contemporary sport. *Sport Science Review*, 20(5-6), 25-26.

Vidoni, C. & Ward, P. (2009). Effects of Fair Play Instruction on student social skills during a middle school Sport Education unit. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 14(3), 285-310.

Whitehead, J. (2011). Understanding fair play in youth sport through children’s values and attitudes: Some insights of Martin Lee. *Physical Education Matters*, 6(1), 23-27.

Websites:

www.un.org

<https://www.fairplayinternational.org/what-is-fair-play->

www.sdgs.un.org

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015>

<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-sport-achieving-sustainable-development-goals>

Endnotes:

¹ For more information on this topic you can visit the following sites (among others):

<https://www.express.co.uk/sport/tennis/1855609/Novak-Djokovic-Australian-Open-ban-2022>;

<https://www.cbssports.com/tennis/news/australian-open-2022-novak-djokovic-deported-after-court-upholds-visa-cancellation/>;

https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/32397602/kyrie-irving-says-decision-remain-unvaccinated-being-true-feels-good-me

² For more information on this topic you can visit the following sites (among others):

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/qatar/report-qatar>;

<https://freedomhouse.org/article/long-shadow-qatars-human-rights-abuses>;

<https://www.npr.org/2022/11/23/1138967472/german-players-cover-their-mouths-at-the-world-cup-to-protest-fifa#:~:text=World-,%20German%20players%20cover%20their%20mouths%20at%20the%20World%20Cup%20to,discrimination%20in%20host%20nation%20Qatar>

³ For more information on this topic you can visit the following sites (among others):

<https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1123295/russia-banned-from-2023-fiba-world-cup>;

<https://www.reuters.com/sports/basketball/russias-mens-basketball-team-banned-olympic-pre-qualification-2023-04-18/>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p9dhtJQeRk>;

<https://www.irishtimes.com/video/sport/tennis/2023/06/03/ukrainian-svitolina-refuses-to-shake-hands-with-russian-blinkova-after-french-open-win/>;