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During the past couple of decades, international sports have been undergoing profound changes, and several major problem areas have emerged that together form the core of modern sport studies. They include the complex problem of doping; the commercialization of sports, and the related development of professionalization and increased media power; the juridification of professional sports and the increasing intervention of civil and criminal of law within the domains of sport; and the ever growing and intractable problem of sports riots. In his latest book, *Aggression in the Sports World: A Social Psychological Perspective* (Oxford University Press), the Canadian psychology professor Gordon W. Russell touches upon some of these problem areas, and lands right in the middle of others. His book is about aggression on as well as off the pitch and offers a nigh on exhaustive survey of literature relevant to the problem of aggression and violence related to sports. We gave the book to Lisa Joern, who has done research and published in the field. In her review, Joern finds that Russell's book, with its extensive and thorough exposition of schools and perspectives in the area, and minor oversights notwithstanding, is an invaluable reference work for regular consultations.

## Aggression in sport – ugly, or just part of the game?

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*Gordon W. Russell***Aggression in the Sports World: A Social Psychological Perspective**

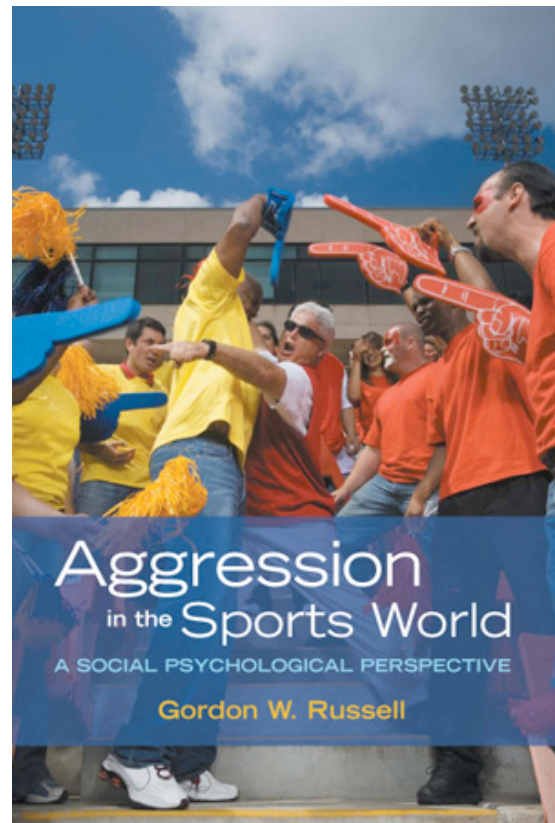
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Aggression is an integral part of contemporary sports. In his book *Aggression in the Sports World: A Social Psychological Perspective* Gordon W. Russell explores the relationship between aggression and sport. The text, which is a comprehensive survey of the most recent and important research in the study of sports aggression, is both international and interdisciplinary in scope, and includes coverage of a variety of initiatives that are being, or have been, developed to prevent or minimize the severity of riots and panics.

The subject of this book – aggression – can be defined as any interpersonal behavior intended to cause physical harm or mental distress. In a sports context, aggression can best be defined as an unprovoked physical or verbal assault, and aggressiveness as the propensity to commit such an assault. The sporting community, however, draws a distinction between aggression and aggressiveness, and the (brutal) body contact that is seen as integral to some sports such as rugby, boxing or the martial arts. This kind of



contact conforms to the rules of the sport and is completely legitimate even when the same sort of behaviour outside the sports context is defined as criminal. Also, participants in these sports, by the very act of taking part, have implicitly accepted the inevitability of rough contact. They have implicitly consented to the probability of minor injury and the possibility of serious injury.

But even participants in these contact sports cannot, however, reasonably be said to have agreed to injuries sustained from physical assaults that violate the written and unwritten rules of the sport. This latter sort of aggression is illegitimate and sometimes even illegal. Although, in some sports and some sporting situations there appears to be a gray zone where aggression that consists of behaviors that violate the official rules of the sport is accepted by players as a legitimate part of the game. The picture is pretty much the same where the sports fans are concerned.

Accepting that aggression and aggressiveness is part of sport is one thing; however, there's a whole host of interested parties both inside and outside the sporting community, including politicians and police authorities, which are interested in the question of whether there are any factors that affect aggression in sport or any conditions that increase the level. Gordon Russell's book provides a good starting point for gaining an understanding of the real meaning of this question, and valid suggestions as to where one can begin to look for answers.

In a nearly exhaustive treatment of the subject, Russell pulls together the main themes relevant to the relationship between sport and aggression, both from a social psychological perspective and by drawing on a variety of interdisciplinary research on the topic in a balanced way.

The first chapter examines the role of various external social influences on human aggression, e.g. the power of authorities to influence interpersonal aggression or the effect of provocations, such as hurtful remarks, chants and songs. It also discusses the most likely targets for aggression, such as officials, women or blacks and investigates the role of prominent athletes and their effect on their admirers. The section looks at negative role models as well as defining the qualities required by an athlete if he or she is to be considered a *true hero*. Apparently, being considered true heroes requires not only physical excellence,\* but also moral excellence (e.g. honesty, humility, sportsmanship and generosity) and social values, which means they must use their influence to improve the lives of others less fortunate. Russell admits that the model sets extremely high ideals. Nonetheless, according to the author, is it a good starting point. The model seems problematic to me since these expectations can convert sport into something that it is not by ascribing ethical meaning to what is, first and foremost, an aesthetic phenomenon. Nonetheless, on the whole the chapter is interesting.

Chapter 2 briefly reviews a number of personality models that feature aggression as a central trait. Also, the role of testosterone and sex differences is explored and so is a new marker for physical aggression: the finger digit ratio, which is thought to be linked with a number of personal characteristics. According to this theory the length of a man's fingers can reveal how physically aggressive he is; for example, it is claimed that the shorter a man's index finger is compared to the ring finger, the more boisterous he will be. This focus on personal factors that may affect aggressiveness is followed, in Chapter 3, by a discussion of environmental factors believed to have an influence on our state of mood, for example temperature, noise, drugs, alcohol, steroids, the presence of weapon or competition, all of which have been shown to increase aggression. Even though Russell understandably seems sceptical, the chapter also reviews more dubious research that has tried to find a link between factors such as the colour pink and lunar influences and aggression.

The following three chapters deal with more well-known issues concerning aggression in sport. So, for example, in Chapter 4 the focus is on the role of the media in creating conflicts and increasing aggression. In addition, to the more predictable studies in this area, Russell also includes some surprising research that has shown that, contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence that an addiction to sport, whether of the active or armchair variety, has any effect on marital or romantic relationships – so this stereotype is busted. This chapter also reviews a range of studies that have looked at the effects of media violence, and in particular the question of whether aggressive behaviour on screen increases viewer aggression. According to Russell's sources, with few exceptions the answer seems to be 'yes'. The chapter also reviews studies that support the notion that those drawn to watching media violence are themselves dispositionally more aggressive than others.

In chapter 5 Russell explores an unwelcome accompaniment to spectator sports: sports riots. Sports riots have long been a source of political and juridical concern; attempts to impose control have been constant, through legislation, new policing strategies, and media excoriations of disorderly fans. Over the years a cohort of crowd control specialists has emerged who have been given the task of minimizing supporter violence, and to this end they have increasingly looked to researchers for new ideas. Russell reviews some important findings on the subject, and the chapter manages to go beyond simply reporting on the pathologies of sports riots that reduce violent interaction to individual aggression, and so succeeds in showing the complexity and diversity of riots in sport settings. One important reference, however, is missing from Russell's otherwise comprehensive text, and that is Clifford Stott and Geoff Pearson's *'Football Hooliganism'. Policing and the War on the 'English Disease'* (2006). Stott and Pearson's

book explores how violence is a complex process of interactions between fans, locals and police, all informed by the media. It contains some very detailed case studies that reveal the complex processes which lead to violence. These descriptions constitute valuable social scientific material depicting the realities of social interaction, and their recommendations for policing reforms contain strategies that have already proven successful and seem to have influenced European national police forces and policy-makers. In fairness, it must be mentioned that Stott's earlier work is present, so this does by no means detracts from a very useful chapter that not only addresses theoretical issues, but goes some way to offering suggestions for reducing sports violence. A subject that is likely to be of broad interest since sports riots remain a disturbing problem throughout the world.

This practical theme is also carried through to Chapter 6, which focuses on the less common but even more deadly phenomenon of panic.

On the whole, Russell's book provides the reader with many examples of solid theory that can be used to explore aggression in sport. Russell succeeds in presenting a broad, well-researched, interdisciplinary collection of perspectives of sport and aggression that is likely to be informative and interesting for anyone interested in sports aggression. The book summarizes and evaluates pertinent literature and includes an extensive bibliography. For all those wanting a broad overview of aggression in and surrounding sport Russell's text is a valuable reference book for regular consultation.

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