

# Sports and the Ethical Challenges They Pose\*

Sports raise many questions of practical urgency that require careful consideration and analysis if our athletic lives are to go well. For example, if we decide that an athletic career is something we are called to pursue, a goal worthy of our devotion, we will be faced with the question when to begin our quest for athletic perfection. After all, sports are a young person's game, best pursued when our bodies are still nimble enough to endure the rigorous training they will require, and to overcome the inevitable injuries that we will incur as we strive for athletic excellence. But how young, and how all consuming should our striving for athletic glory be? If sports are to be our main passion, what about our personal relationships, our social and political obligations, our education? And once we decide how much of ourselves we should give over to our athletic undertakings, we will soon be faced with other no less daunting questions. Probably the most daunting of them all, is how hard should we try to win. Of course, it goes without saying that to be successful in sports entails hard training, special diets, and great discipline. But what doesn't go without saying are the harder choices today's athletes can scarcely evade, perhaps foremost whether to dope or not. And then there's the question of how we should treat our athletic peers in our zeal to be the best that we can be. Can I simply use my competitors to get what I want, to win, or are their moral boundaries that forbid merely using them in this self-regarding fashion - - that demand I respect them as autonomous persons in their own right?

When we face such questions, as we surely must at the risk of not being persons at all, genuine human agents, we aim to make the **right** decisions and choices. But what makes something the **right** choice, the **correct** decision? The answer, I want to claim, steers us into distinctly philosophical territory, in particular, unmistakable ethical terrain. For ethical questions are all about determining how we **should** act

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\* Foreword of William J. Morgan, Professor at Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the School of Dentistry, University of Southern California (Los Angeles), Interim Director of Center for Sport, Citizenship and Society Initiative, John Glenn School of Public Policy, The Ohio State University (Columbus, Ohio) and Associate Faculty Member at Department of Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University (Columbus, Ohio).

in the various situations we find ourselves in, questions about what standards should guide our decisions and actions in such situations. When directed to sports, such ethical questions require we ask ourselves what standards are appropriate to evaluate our conduct in sport settings, to decide whether to compete or not, to dope or not, to bend or break the rules or not, to treat our opponents with moral respect or not. As I have already implied, these kinds of moral queries are inescapable; for, as the philosopher Simon Blackburn so aptly put it, "there is no living without standards of living."<sup>1</sup> But ethical questions differ from other practical questions we face in our lives in important ways. Let me briefly explain.

Roughly speaking, there are three kinds of questions that are especially pertinent to our practical lives. The first kind are what we might call objective questions, questions such as what is the boiling point of water? Or what is the median wage for people who work, say, in North America? What is distinctive about questions of this sort is that there is always a single, definitive, answer to them, that is, an answer that settles the matter once and for all, and one that can simply be confirmed by looking the answer up at the back of some book or other. The second kind of question we frequently encounter is of the subjective kind. Examples include questions such as what is your favorite color, or flavor of ice cream? These sort of questions, of course, admit of many different answers, potentially at least as many answers and there are persons so queried, because what we are after here are people's personal tastes, their subjective desires. That is why, assuming people are being forthcoming with us, there can be no one right or wrong answer to such inquiries. The third kind of question is of the normative variety, which probes the standards we employ to justify our answers. Examples of normative questions are prudential ones like should I go to college? Aesthetic ones like was Saul Bellow a better writer than F. Scott Fitzgerald? Or ethical questions such as is it ever permissible to assist someone to end her life, or more to our present interest, is it ever permissible to win by cheating?

Unfortunately, it is becoming more commonplace in our contemporary era both in and outside of sports to elide normative questions especially of the ethical kind, to pretend, in effect, there are no such questions to be asked. What I mean is that many people today believe and act as if there are only two kinds of questions relevant to their lives: objective questions that yield empirically reliable answers that are either true or false, or subjective questions that yield a wide range of answers that merely reflect our personal preferences and that, therefore, defy categorization as either true or false (to reiterate, if I honestly say my favorite color is purple there is nothing more to say about this matter, which is why if someone retorts you're

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Blackburn. *Being Good*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 53.

wrong about that, I can only assume the person misunderstood the question or is a nut case). But this shirking of the normative is not just a simple cognitive mistake but a decisive existential one, since so much of our lives are taken up with normative questions about how we should lead our lives. For while it is accurate to say questions about how we should live do not admit of one objective, knockdown answer, an answer that can be found at the back of some book, they also do not admit of subjective answers that consist of nothing more than registering our personal preferences. On the contrary, normative questions of the ethical sort in question here admit of better and worse answers, and what counts as a better and a worse answer has everything to do with the strength of the reasons and arguments presented, with the answer that best justifies the claim made, and almost nothing to do with our empirical judgments or personal opinions. So if I claim that assisted suicide or doping is ethically wrong, no one has cause to listen to what I have to say unless I can give good reasons and arguments to back up my claim. That is why when it comes to questions like these citing some supposed authority or simply rattling off my personal preferences are non-starters, because what we are seeking is a reasoned argument that can justify the matter at hand.

It goes without saying that if ethical questions can only be settled by reasons and arguments, by the asking and giving of reasons, then the answers we give to these questions may well go against our personal desires and preferences. That is to say, we might well desire, and strongly desire, to win no matter what it takes, but be unable to justify our actions to our fellow competitors and to the larger athletic public. This raises the natural question why be moral if being moral speaks against our own personal interests, requires us to act contrary to our own self-interests. The question is indeed apt, since it is true that being moral rules out brute egoism, rules out always putting oneself first or, to put it another way, always looking at some situation exclusively in terms of what's in it for me. But very, very few of us today, even in these hardly altruistic times, are egoists to this extreme, are so wrapped up in ourselves and our own personal concerns to be oblivious to the views of our relevant peers, be they the athletic community, or the political community, or whatever circles we may happen to run in. This is important because it means we can't help but be concerned by what others whom we value think of our actions, which is why we try so very hard to earn their approval. That is why someone who blithely replies that the reason he helped his terminally ill friend to end his life was because he felt like it, or cheated to win the athletic contest because he couldn't face failure, can rightly expect the swift and harsh reproach of his compatriots, to be viewed by them as someone not worthy of their respect, let alone their admiration. To paraphrase the eminent philosopher Bernard Williams, if we have no way of living that anyone we

respect would respect, let alone admire, there is no good reason to respect, let alone admire, ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

What goes for our personal lives goes as well, of course, for our athletic lives. That is the reason I heartily welcome the present collection of essays not, to be sure, because they offer easy answers to not so easy questions, which only require we peruse them for the solutions they offer without considering the quality of the arguments that inform them. Rather, I welcome these essays precisely because they don't provide pat answers to difficult ethical questions, but carefully crafted arguments that try to make ethical sense of our athletic endeavors. The best compliment we readers can pay these authors, therefore, is to think carefully along with them, to evaluate critically what they offer us in the way of arguments. Doing so is not only important because of the present sorry moral state of contemporary sports at all levels today, but because of the no less sorry low state of the discourse that they currently attract - - in which hero-worship and petty criticism trump the thoughtful analysis contemporary sports so desperately need. Those of us who profess a love of sports, therefore, have something substantive to feast on in these essays, something that warrants our full attention and careful scrutiny. All that remains to be said, then, is to have at it, to join in the critical dialogue instigated by these essays as to what meaning and place sports should enjoy in our lives.

**William J. Morgan**

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams. *Shame and Necessity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 85.