SPORT, VIOLENCE AND SOCIETY

Kevin Young

SPORT, VIOLENCE AND SOCIETY

Kevin Young

R **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

SPORT, VIOLENCE AND SOCIETY

- Is violence an intrinsic component of contemporary sport?
- How does violence within sport reflect upon the attitudes of wider society?

In this landmark study of violence in and around contemporary sport, Kevin Young offers the first comprehensive sociological analysis of an issue of central importance within sport studies. The book explores organized and spontaneous violence, both on the field and off, and calls for a much broader definition of 'sports-related violence,' to include issues as diverse as criminal behaviour by players, abuse within sport and exploitatory labour practices.

Offering a sophisticated new theoretical framework for understanding violence in a sporting context, and including a wide range of case studies and empirical data, from professional soccer in Europe to ice hockey in North America, the book establishes a benchmark for the study of violence within sport and wider society. Through close examination of often contradictory trends, from anti-violence initiatives in professional sports leagues to the role of the media in encouraging hyper-aggression, the book throws new light on our understanding of the socially-embedded character of sport and its fundamental ties to history, culture, politics, social class, gender and the law.

Kevin Young is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary, Canada. He has served on the editorial boards of several journals, including *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Sociology of Sport Journal* and *Soccer and Society*. Young has also served on the executive board of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport and as vice president of the International Sociology of Sport Association.

**This book is dedicated to the memory of
Michael Dewar Smith, whose pioneering
contributions to Canadian studies of
(sports) violence should never be underestimated.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

The idea for this book, which has taken far too long for me to write, probably started in the late 1970s when, as an undergraduate university student in the UK, I was exposed to one of the first in-depth sociological investigations into 'football (soccer) hooliganism.' Even then, long before emigration and travel provided an opportunity to witness global sports violence first-hand, it seemed unlikely to me that the phenomenon was so unidimensional that it was limited to the aggressive proclivities of young British soccer supporters (a stereotypical view popular at the time, and one that continues to be espoused by many North Americans). After all, if sports violence, as with sport more broadly, was indeed *social* and *cultural* – 'lesson one' in the sociology of sport – then other societies and other cultures must forge their own versions of it. And of course they do. This book represents a long-standing fascination with the varied manifestations of violence in the sporting cultures of many countries, and the sociological threads that tie together and underpin those manifestations.

Aspects of both organized and spontaneous violence in sport have been seen as a serious social problem in many settings for some time, both on and off the field of play. Fans of European sport, particularly soccer, have gained notoriety for their xenophobic rituals inside and outside stadia. Violent sports crowd disturbances have also occurred with predictable frequency in Australia, Central and South America, Asia and North America. In most of these contexts, particular behaviours have prompted solicitous responses from politicians, police, sports officials and journalists. Apart from its most familiar, and most consistently reported, dimensions (the two most studied likely being soccer hooliganism and player violence in ice hockey), scholars have been relatively slow in turning their attention to the problem. Indeed, although thousands of books and articles have been written on sport, until recently, little serious attention has been paid to the disorderly behaviour, roles and rituals of spectators (again, with the notable exception of

soccer 'hooligans' from Europe, and England in particular). This is even more true of athletes themselves, whose on-field 'aggro,' located within or outside the rules, has traditionally been rationalized as 'just part of the game.' As I will argue in this book, entire clusters of related and harmful dimensions of sports violence have been either under-studied or completely *un*studied.

Violent and disorderly incidents in sport have occurred in almost all settings where sport occupies cultural significance. A surprisingly wide range of sports are involved: baseball, golf, cricket, 'Aussie Rules' football, wrestling, ice hockey, boxing, horse racing, basketball, motorcycle and car racing, lacrosse, American and Canadian football, rugby and, of course, soccer. It is equally clear that such incidents are not only of recent origin, as historical accounts attest (Guttmann 1986).

While violence in sport is not new, then, what remains obvious and germane today is a degree of public and official urgency vis-à-vis 'getting to know' and 'coming to grips with' particular dimensions of the problem. Despite some clear contradictions in the way in that *sports violence* has traditionally been approached (for instance, authorities have been keen to police crowd disorder out of existence, but the often much more injurious forms of on-field aggression have been condoned), even the most staunch supporter of, and apologist for, sport can no longer deny that the positive attributes of sports are often compromised by a darker downside. Whether it is the havoc that crowd violence causes in the lives of innocent victims and entire communities as they prepare for game-day 'disruptions,' the willingness of sports organizers and players to contribute to a culture where almost everyone seems to get hurt (sometimes catastrophically) or the cynicism of sports promoters and the sports media in using violence and injury to 'sell copy' and make profit in a violence-approving climate, there are numerous ways in which we may begin to suspect that violence, far from being incidental to sport, appears to be one of its primary dimensions, organizing principles and attractions.

As an institution, sport is notoriously slow to change. But it is not static. Consider the following scenarios (which may also be seen in other sports and other contexts) in North American ice hockey: as professional, organized amateur and recreational versions of the game become increasingly litigious and the courts come to re-define traditionally acceptable sports behaviour as 'crime' (witness long sequences of players formally charged with assault), as workers' rights continue to prompt players' associations to critically evaluate the risky conditions of their employment (as may be seen in an increasing demand for safety and better equipment), as more and more official pressure is brought to bear on leagues to adopt anti-violence and anti-injury platforms (witness recent steps taken by the National Hockey League (NHL) to reduce 'high-hits' and concussions), as alternatives to traditionally aggressive models of sport are explored and adopted (witness the non-contact ice-hockey leagues throughout Canada) and as communities become increasingly 'green' and their accounting processes more transparent (as may be seen in the growing trend towards energy and waste efficiency in hockey arenas), processes of aggression, violence and victimization related to sport are taking on new levels of seriousness and poignancy in public debate. There is a sociological synchronicity here, of

course, with decreasing tolerance towards other aspects of violence more broadly in society.

All of this is not to suggest that aggression, violence and victimization in sport are 'on the way out.' Simply put, things are far more complicated than this and, as this book will show, there are many examples of how sport continues to encourage, systematically and in patterned ways, hyper-aggressivity, forms of exploitation and abuse and injury-producing and community-compromising behaviours. But there is no doubt that sports violence (and its perceived causes and outcomes) is being taken as seriously today as it has ever been, and a critical sociological study examining international aspects of the phenomenon seems both important and timely. The time also seems right for an examination of violence in sport that does not represent an isolated snapshot of any single component of sports-related aggression, violence or victimization, but is, rather, sensitive to the fact that ostensibly *un*linked and apparently disparate behaviours share sociological things in common. These 'things' are better referred to as causes, manifestations and outcomes, and essentially derive from the stratifying elements (such as gender, race, social class, age etc.) that tie all societies together, as well as relations of power in every community and sport setting. In investigating and identifying these sociological layers and links, the primary purpose of this book, then, is to reconsider how best to define, think about and make sense of *sports-related violence* (SRV).

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Tables

1

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Definitions, theories and perspectives

Introduction

Even when Michael Smith published his seminal early volume, *Violence and Sport*, in 1983, it was the case that violence had been studied from, as he put it, 'the spectrum of academic disciplines from anatomy to zoology' (p. 1). While we are in the fortunate position today to benefit from a far greater, and still expanding, body of research on violence, most of it conducted within the disciplines of sociology, psychology and criminology, what remains baffling is that so little of it has attempted to define and explain violence related to *sport*. Almost all of the sociological research on sports violence emanates from the subdiscipline of the sociology of sport; the parent discipline has basically ignored it.

Where sociology and criminology are concerned, the predictable fascination with, for example, murder, gangs, delinquency, domestic violence, rape, drugs, riots and serial killers endures, but almost none of this colossal sociological/criminological literature even mentions the types of violence that may be done in sport contexts, and it certainly does not take the next step to examine whether violence in different social institutions shares commonalities in cause, expression or outcome. Admittedly, that sort of comparative approach would be ambitious, and it is not the express purpose here, but it does come 'into play' at many junctures of this book. Surely, even the most elementary sociological/criminological mind would suspect that the sorts of social dimensions that underpin any of the aforementioned behaviours may occur in another dominant social institution such as sport. Yet, only a cursory glance at the sociology of violence and criminology literatures is needed to see that the terms 'sport,' or 'sports violence,' are rarely mentioned. Another way of thinking about the phrase 'rarely mentioned' is 'rarely taken seriously.' This is a sociological book that attempts to take violence in sport seriously and, in so doing, brings together a cluster of sociological literatures to encourage a fresh way of thinking about *sports-related violence* (SRV).

Defining violence

One of the immediate problems anyone wanting to study 'sports violence' faces is the constellation of terms that has been used to define the subject matter, many of which have been used interchangeably and often carelessly. Put simply, and as Cashmore (2000: 436) has candidly observed, sports violence is 'difficult to pin down.' The sociology of sport literature contains extensive reviews of the meaning of a very long list of terms, most of which, confusingly, bear relevance and which, to be fair, also appear in this book. As Coakley and Donnelly note (2009: 187), this list includes, but is not limited to, terms such as 'physical, assertive, tough, rough, competitive, intense, intimidating, risky, aggressive, destructive, and violent.' It is understandable that these signifiers appear in the violence research – indeed, it would be difficult to imagine that research without them. All of them are relevant, but none more so than 'aggression' and 'violence.'

At this stage, and before moving on to a review of theories of causes of aggression and violence, it is important to define these two salient terms. To this end, Coakley and Donnelly (2009: 187–188), who have been as succinct on the matter as anyone, define *aggression* as 'verbal or physical actions grounded in an intent to dominate, control, or do harm to another person,' while *violence* is understood by them to refer to 'the use of excessive physical force, which causes or has the potential to cause harm or destruction.' As with all such attempts, these definitions are not entirely satisfactory and inevitably contain ambiguities and contradictions. But Coakley and Donnelly are correct to suggest that aggression is normally regarded as a broader and more generic concept, while violence is typically used to refer to physical forms of aggression, and especially excessive and harmful physical forms of aggression. The adoption of these terms in this book is similarly based upon such a distinction.

Theories of violence

Disagreements and uncertainties about how the terms 'aggression' and 'violence' may be used are clearly visible in the theoretical literature. As with *definitions* of violence, researchers have attempted to *explain* violence (and related phenomena such as aggression and victimization) using a variety of theories and perspectives. Eller (2006: 31) correctly summarizes the main camps of a vast literature:

> The two most general perspectives are the 'internal' and the 'external' – that is, whether the cause or source of violence is 'inside' the violent individual (in his head or her 'mind' or personality or genes) or 'outside' the violent individual (in the social situations, values, or structures in which he or she acts). These two overarching perspectives correspond roughly to biology and psychology on the one hand and sociology and anthropology on the other . . .

While this chapter reviews both theoretical camps, and respects the broad and complex landscape of existing work and the varied academic disciplines it represents, it privileges thinking (i.e. defining and theorizing) about violence in sport *sociologically*. What follows is not an exhaustive review of *all* theories of violence but, rather, a selective review whose purpose is to showcase the perspectives that have been, and continue to be, most adopted and helpful in making sense of violence as it occurs in the world of sport (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2).

Biological and psychological approaches

Instinct theory

Following some of the classic early thinkers, such as Aristotle (Berczeller 1967), and the seventeenth-century English political-philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1957), all of whom believed that humans were violent 'by nature,' instinct theorists

TABLE 1.1 Biological and psychological approaches to aggression and violence

Approach		*Three key arguments*
Instinct theory	1	Humans are naturally aggressive; aggression is an innate biological drive.
	2	Humans lack a natural mechanism for inhibiting aggression.
	3	It is possible to extrapolate from physical appearance to a propensity to aggress.
Frustration–aggression hypothesis	1	Aggression is a consequence of frustration.
	2	The likelihood and level of aggression are related to the type and level of frustration.
	3	Once the source of aggression is countered, frustration, and thus aggression, subsides.
Hostile and instrumental aggression	1	Humans use aggression to achieve specific goals.
	2	Hostile aggression (or 'angry' aggression) is used intentionally to inflict harm or damage.
	3	Instrumental aggression is used strategically to achieve a goal other than harming the individual or target.
Catharsis	1	In routine, everyday life, humans accumulate frustrations.
	2	Societies contain channels through which frustrations may be purged responsibly.
	3	In the absence of a socially tolerated 'safety valve', aggression may worsen and manifest itself more dangerously.
Reversal theory	1	Human behaviour is comprised of four motivational states or conditions: telic-paratelic, conformity-negativism, mastery-sympathy and autic-alloic.
	2	Frustration and satiation determine whether the response will be aggressive or passive.
	3	The four 'meta-motivational' states can occur simultaneously and be 'switched' from one to another depending on arousal.

TABLE 1.2 Sociological approaches to aggression and violence

Approach		*Three key arguments*
Social learning theory	1	Aggression derives not from biological cues, but from observing, and modelling, the behaviour of others.
	2	Through observation, humans learn how aggression may be used to perform roles, to construct and confirm identity, and to promote rewards.
	3	Aggression does not serve 'safety valve', or cathartic, functions for society.
Techniques of neutralization	1	Sociological theory must explain not only the structural causes of crime and violence, but also show how these causes are translated into action by individuals.
	2	Learning how to justify social behaviour is as important as learning how to do it.
	3	Offenders may deny responsibility, injury or victimization, condemn the condemners, or appeal to higher loyalties.
Subculture of violence	1	Societies contain sub-groups (subcultures) governed by their own unique rules, norms and values.
	2	Pro-violent subcultures may develop in the general society or in specific workplaces.
	3	Subcultural rules, norms and values are restricted to, and contained within, the subcultural setting.
Figurational ('process') sociology	1	Social action is the outcome of complex webs of power-imbued interdependency chains between individuals and groups.
	2	Since societies generally pacify over time, some forms of aggression may be understood in terms of the 'quest for excitement in relatively unexciting societies.'
	3	Sport represents a socially acceptable forum for the 'controlled de-controlling' of emotions.
Victimology	1	Victimization is not only caused by individual actors, but also by institutions, including workplaces and governments.
	2	Society shows a high tolerance for victimization when it occurs in autonomous social institutions, such as the home, work or sport.
	3	Professional athletes should be considered as 'workers' and provided the sorts of legal protections and benefits other workplaces offer.
Sports ethic	1	Athletes and those assessing athletes (e.g. coaches, administrators, sponsors and fans) both respect and reward task-commitment in sport.
	2	Identity and status are related to making sacrifices, striving for distinction, accepting risks and refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of winning.
	3	Over-conformity to the sports ethic stems from a widespread sense of anxiety and self-doubt among athletes.

argue that, since our 'pre-human' ancestors were 'naturally' aggressive, modern day humans share the same trait and lack, in Goldstein's terms, 'a well-developed mechanism for the inhibition of aggression' (1986: 5). The theory was brought to life in the twentieth century by scholars interested in tracing the biological genesis of social behaviour, such as ethologists Konrad Lorenz (1966) and Desmond Morris (1967), but it has its embryonic criminological roots in Lombrosian logic that, among other things, extrapolates from physical features, such as facial characteristics (physiognomy), skull shape (phrenology) and body type (somatology) to criminal propensity (Deutschmann 2007).

In addition to representing a clearly reductionist view of society, and viewing humans as little more than a hodgepodge of genomes waiting to be provoked, instinct theory is also unable to address the different ways in which, and the relative degrees to which, violence is acted out, such as the myriad forms that violence assumes both within the rules of sport (e.g. body checking in ice hockey) and outside the rules of sport (e.g. fist-fighting in ice hockey), and the fact that aggressive behaviour varies enormously by individual (e.g. exposed to the same cues, not all ice-hockey players aggress, retaliate or fight).

The frustration–aggression hypothesis (FAH)

Central to the frustration–aggression hypothesis (FAH) is the definition of frustration as 'interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response at its proper time in the behaviour sequence' (Berkowitz 1978: 692). Popularized by a group of researchers at Yale University in the 1930s (Dollard et al. 1939), the FAH was broken down into three simple arguments: (1) aggression is always a result of frustration; (2) frustration always leads to aggression; and, (3) there is an inclination towards aggression when the aggressive act is disallowed, but this decreases once an object or person (i.e. the source of frustration) is confronted (Berkowitz 1978: 692). The FAH was later modified slightly to acknowledge that aggression is not *always* the response to frustration and that frustration may lead to 'a number of different responses, [only] one of which is an instigation to some form of aggression' (Miller 1941: 338). The approach was used to explain aspects of sports crowd disorder in the 1970s (Russell and Drewry 1976) and, more recently, soccer hooliganism in Scandinavia (Pirks 2010).

The FAH perspective is minimally useful in underlining the relationship between frustration and aggression, but sport is filled with episodes where frustration does not lead to aggression, and where aggression takes place, either inside or outside the rules of the game, where there is little frustration or none at all. Stated simply, frustration does not always cause or provoke aggression and, again, can be mitigated by any number of game-specific factors (i.e. instructions from coaches, time of occurrence etc.), as well as wider sociological factors (i.e. education, gender, role etc.), including 'choice' (i.e. choosing not to aggress).

The hostile and instrumental aggression approach

Predicated upon the view that aggression is a behaviour that attempts to achieve a specific goal, the hostile and instrumental aggression approach is based on a 'dichotomous outcome' understanding of why aggression occurs. In the first case, instrumental aggression does not pursue the goal of personal hurt or injury (although personal hurt or injury may result); rather, it aims to achieve an external, or related, goal (Berkowitz 1993: 11). For instance, a police officer who shoots a suspect may intend to prevent him from fleeing or protect innocent bystanders rather than seek masochistic satisfaction from the act itself. In the same way, in sport, a baseball pitcher may throw a 'brush-off' pitch not to injure the batsman but to decrease his/ her confidence 'at the plate.' Thus, instrumental aggression is rational and planned, and obtaining the desired goal reinforces the legitimacy of the act (Berkowitz 1993: 11). Conversely, the goal of hostile aggression is to inflict damage (to an object or person) for the express purpose of harming it/them. Also known as 'emotional,' 'angry' or 'reactive' aggression, and sharing obvious overlaps with FAH, it is assumed that this type of action is taken without much planning (Berkowitz 1993: 11). In sport, spontaneously 'cleating' (or raking, i.e. the deliberate scraping of boot cleats [studs] against skin to cause pain or injury) an opponent in soccer, throwing a 'scrum punch' in rugby or elbowing an opponent under the net in basketball are examples of actions intended to make targets suffer by inflicting pain.

Although it is sometimes given lip-service in the sociology of sport research, and has obvious potential for application to any number of aggressive acts and strategies within sport, the hostile and instrumental aggression approach may, again, be found largely in psychological accounts of sport behaviour (e.g. Mintah et al. 1999). But here, too, it has generally been rejected for being overly simplistic (Bushman and Anderson 2001). Most critics point out that the logic of the hostile–instrumental dichotomy could be completely reversed, with instrumental aggression involving anger and hostile aggression being executed coldly and in a pre-determined way.

Catharsis theory

Again, the role of frustration features centrally here. Proponents of 'catharsis' believe that humans accumulate frustrations in daily life that can potentially lead to aggressive behaviour, but that can also be discharged ('purged' or 'vented') by participating in tension-relieving activities, or through observing others participate in such activities. In one of the earliest renditions of sport as a social 'safety valve,' Brill (1929: 434) celebrated the 'rewards' of sport spectating for men: 'He will purge himself of impulses which, too dammed up, would lead to private broils and public disorder. He would achieve exaltation, vicarious but real. He will be a better individual, a better citizen, a better husband and father.' This view remained popular throughout much of the twentieth century, as Beisser (1967: 183) indicated in the 1960s: