ANGER MANAGEMENT IN SPORT

Understanding and Controlling Violence in Athletes

MITCH ABRAMS

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Preface

This book is the product of a 12-year journey of formally studying the relationship between anger and sports. This journey was originally fueled by what I observed growing up. As a child, I lived in Starrett City, a federally subsidized housing development in the southeast corner of Brooklyn, New York. Initially, there were housing quotas to insure a racially diverse neighborhood in a rent-controlled environment. Starrett City is surrounded by three very different neighborhoods. To the east and to the west respectively were Howard Beach and Canarsie which, at that time, were two decidedly Italian/Jewish American neighborhoods with a strong thread of racism pervading them. Starrett City, however, was bordered on both sides by water and wasteland making those two neighborhoods seem much farther away. Immediately to the north were East New York and Brownsville—two of the most crime infested sections of New York and they had a much greater influence on Starrett City than their other neighbors.

Crime, and ultimately gangs, made attempts to infiltrate our neighborhood. Strangely, segregation amongst us was based more along the lines of whether or not you were an athlete than the color of your skin. There was a sense of community that didn't tolerate the intrusion of "outsiders." Like many neighborhoods, the power of quick money and local fame led some to change their paths. Many of the people from that neighborhood are now dead or in jail. The one thing that always troubled me was: With so many great athletes (I can tell you from seeing high school to professional athletes competing up close, there were some from our midst that "coulda been a contender"), why were none of them getting to the next level? Why were some able to keep their heads on straight and others turn to the world of violence? In Brooklyn, many of the best athletes never played a day of school-organized sports. Whether it was because of the limited resources of the PSAL (Public School Athletic League—New York City's High School Sports Authority), the lack of contacts that the coaches had in getting them into impressive college sports programs, or because they didn't care to go to school long enough to participate. Many of the best athletes played "street ball" and never got out of the 'hood. Why not?

This question led to my formal pursuit of the answer. In graduate school, I was mentored by Dr. Eva Feindler who is one of the nation's experts in child and adolescent anger management. I immediately wanted to both learn about the treatment of anger and understand what role it plays in sports. As an unknown in sport psychology, a pesky graduate student, I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Shane Murphy at a conference

in Long Island and after only a couple of conversations, I was fueled with the motivation to go develop a niche in the sport psychology field – developing anger management programs for athletes.

Like all overzealous graduate students I developed a hypothesis, combed the research, pretended to ignore the influence of the media, and set out to cure the world of violent athletes. The research (as will be reviewed later) pointed to athletes being angrier, more delinquent and more violent than non-athletes. The numerous books, chapters, and texts that argued the point leaned towards similar conclusions...if they addressed anger and violence in sports at all. A lot of "experts" were talking about anger and violence in sports, but no one was really talking about what to do about it...or if anything should be done about it. I bought the opinion glorified by the media (and only partially supported by the research) hook, line and sinker.

I developed a program that taught anger management skills to athletes, and it worked. It took some time however to realize that I was operating on basic assumptions that turned out, in my opinion, to be a complete falsehood. The idea that athletes are more violent than non-athletes is a myth.

Anger, violence, and impulse control problems are reaching epidemic proportions in the United States and believing that somehow being an athlete completely insulates them is ludicrous. I believe that there is some insulative value to sport participation and many athletes that come from violent backgrounds appear to show lower incidence of violence than would be expected based upon their peer-group—and we will discuss why.

The major theme of this book takes the position that although athletes are not convincingly more violent than non-athletes, they represent an at-risk population for three major reasons:

1. The belief that athletes are healthy and immune from "normal" problems.
2. There are added stressors that athletes face that they may have difficulty coping with.
3. Athletes will be scrutinized due to their popularity and as such they need to be even more cautious to manage their emotions.

There are glaring problems with the study of violence in sport and the bulk of the "research" is, in fact, opinion. In the absence of good research (and the study of this topic does not lend itself to such research), opinion becomes the benchmark that people in the field look to. Therefore, much of what will be presented in this book, though fueled by theory in many areas of study, will not be directly supported by research. My opinions come from working with hundreds of athletes at varying levels of competition, in different sports and sport contexts, as individuals, as teams and as groups. My observations come from solid training in the clinical assessment and treat-

ment of violent people and from my experience working with some of the most dangerous people in society—inmates in State Prison. I have studied anger and violence from the relatively harmless high school athlete struggling for playing time while not passing his classes to the hardened psychopath (with an athletic history) who would have no problem harming himself, you, or anyone else in the quest for his goals. I have come to these conclusions from thinking about the topic, implementing programs, and learning and consulting with colleagues, students, athletes, coaches, parents, members of my audience, and anyone else who can help me understand this paradigm better. The position is psychologically sound, useful, and, most importantly, makes sense. It will open the discussion about this topic and light the path that research should go.

We will start by examining the major theories that help explain anger and aggression in sport, but this can only be meaningful after new definitions are introduced that are much more pragmatic than previous models.

Then, we will provide a review of the history of violence in sport without spending an exorbitant amount of time on it because this is one of the few areas that has been well-covered by other authors.

This will segue into how anger management skills are performance enhancing in sport and in life. They are life skills that everyone would benefit from, but assuming that athletes have been taught these skills when so many people in our society have not, would be a mistake. We will also focus on the role of coaches. Perhaps no group of people can do more to help with this problem. For many years (and for some, up until this very moment) coaches believed being angry helps their athletes become successful. As will be outlined, it can...up until a point, and then it becomes a powerful detractor from success.

Presented to you will be a comprehensive anger management program that includes many of the "how-to" specifics. Assessment tools will be reviewed as well as other evaluative techniques that are used in this work. When athletes need to be referred to clinical personnel for treatment of more severe anger problems will also be highlighted, as well as the pluses and minuses of individual vs. group interventions.

As previously mentioned, athletes may be vulnerable to the same problems as are other people in society (the critical period for presentation of signs of mental illness is between the ages of 16 and 35). This age group also represents the largest percentage of athletes that participate in organized sport. Therefore, an examination of clinical issues that athletes may present with related to anger and violence is prudent. This focus needs to include different aspects of depression since an athlete that is depressed may act out on their emotional pain in the form of hostility towards others. Further, biologically based impulse control disorders, whether part of a psychotic presentation, severe mood disorder, or even a seizure disorder, merit discussion regarding how this may present itself in athletes and what the appropriate course of

action would be. Because of the many restrictions placed on medications by Anti-Doping agencies, ethical issues will be discussed when athletes would benefit from medications to treat their emotional problems. Similarly, we must explore the relationship between substance abuse and violence and athletes. This includes the use of anabolic steroids, and I will present the somewhat controversial opinion that steroids don't cause violence.

Related to this view is the exposure to violence that many athletes have while growing up. Some of them will develop a view of the world that legitimizes violence as a way to solve problems. This view, further compounded by an anti-authority perspective, will make it very difficult for them to consider other ways of solving problems. It also presents obstacles regarding their coachability. In the worst case scenario, some may in fact turn out to become psychopaths. Psychopaths have no conscience nor regard for the rules of society. Short of incarceration, there is little that can be done stop their behavior. Do I believe that there are proportionally more sociopaths in the NFL, for example, than in society at large? No, but statistically, there are some and they will continue to break team rules, societal morals and state and federal law until they are arrested, because that is what they do.

There are some individuals that are of the belief that athletes are more likely to be accused of sexual assault, rape, domestic violence and even murder because they are famous and targeted for a big legal payday. Issues related to criminality will be explored as well as the experience of victims of such crimes who come forward. There is no evidence that rape is false-reported more than any other crime; in fact, it is under-reported. However, when there is fame and fortune involved, might it slightly increase the likelihood of false reports? Yes. But, if you expect to exonerate all athletes as if they *never* engage in such behavior, then you are misleading yourself.

This topic bears greater attention; from the unlikely responsibility of young millionaires, to groupies, to aspects of the athletic culture that may propagate the belief that athletes are above the law, these ideas need to be discussed in the context of violence if plans can be made to eradicate their incidence. We will discuss plans that organizations, including professional sports organizations, may consider to address this problem as well new and creative ideas like entourage training. The idea in this concept would be that any professional athlete could send one person from their entourage to get training on how to keep them out of trouble. If one takes the stance that the athletes, at times, are the victims, then it makes sense to train one of their associates to learn conflict resolution, identification of pending problems, anger management, etc., to help the athlete avoid such quandaries where the wrong decision could result in them losing their opportunities. Therefore critical issues related to Dating Violence will be discussed with an educational plan provided to give athletes the information they need to know to stay out of trouble, if that was there inclination or trajectory, for any of a number

of reasons. The legalities will be introduced as well, as it has become clear from my experiences that male athletes are shocked when they learn the laws regarding dating violence and rape.

To close out the book, I hope to set the course for future navigation in these understudied waters. I challenge my colleagues, athletes, coaches, students and anyone else invested in sports to think about the relationship between anger and sports. I hope that future examination answers more questions and this problem, which is truly not unsolvable, gets reeled in. In its current trajectory, this problem can only put a black eye on sports. And that, given all of the positives that people get from sports, would be a damn shame.

Acknowledgments

This book has been the product of seemingly endless conversations, consultations, observations, arguments, self-reflection, research, and stubbornness. It has gone through several iterations, reviews, updates, and restarts. A great number of people have made this book possible. I knew as I generated this list that it would not be exhaustive, but I will try to mention everyone who helped me understand this complex issue of anger in sport.

First, I want to thank Myles Schrag, Kathleen Bernard, Melissa Zavala, and all the folks at Human Kinetics who stayed with me and tolerated me through the production of this book. I know that I was not always easy to work with, but I am proud of our collective product.

Drs. Eva Feindler and Stephen Ruffins stood out as those who taught me the most early in my career. Eva was my mentor in graduate school and paved the road for me by honing my skills as a psychologist and showing me what an expert in anger management looks like, acts like, and presents like. Stephen, more than any other professor I had, taught me how to think, to consider the less common possibilities that may explain a person's experience, and to avoid falling into the perilous world of pathological certainty: When you think you have it all figured out, you don't. I would also like to thank Dr. Norman Weissberg, who mentored me in Brooklyn College years ago and showed me what a "real clinical psychologist" does as well as the path to become one.

Some of my early coaches—Joel Wayne, Sal LoBello, Bobby Donahue, and Doreen Rallo—helped me learn that having fun, learning skills, and wanting to win can all go hand in hand without anyone walking away sad or angry.

I need to thank some fellow professionals who never read the sign that said, "We're too old to play football." A motley crew of doctors, lawyers, engineers, personal trainers, writers, and executives: Vinny Matthews, Michael Drehwing, Robert "Sid" Sidbury, Randy Williams, Russell Ford, Ed Schlenoff, Andre Best, Rich Chang, Danny Dutton, George Kolbe, Richie Coronato, Brian Coughlin, Mike Freeman, Ralph Vacchiano, Jay Glazer, and our brother we lost on September 11, John Schroeder. Thanks for always making it fun, especially when we took ourselves too seriously.

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everyone starts to learn how to understand the world the way that you do.

Throughout my career I have spent more time with the students than with the professionals, primarily because the students were hungrier, more curious, and more energetic, and because they represented the future that I wanted to be a part of. Some of those students are now successful professionals. Some stayed in sport psychology, and some pursued other endeavors. Thank you to the "partners in crime" whom I came up with: Glenn Pfenninger, Brad Jurica, Tim "Sully" Sullivan, and Drs. Rob Fazio, Josh Avondoglio, Wally Bzdell, and Latisha Forster Scott.

I learned a great deal about anger management and violence while working in the prison system, and I need to acknowledge a couple of people that I met there. Psychiatrist Dr. Peter Martindale is the smartest person I have ever met and is uniquely able to assess a person in crisis in a moment's time and then write a chart note that reads like a novel, providing the exact phenomenology of the person he evaluated. You can almost see the person in front of you. Watching your mastery has taught us all more than you know, but your courage to make difficult decisions is inspiring. I can only hope that it has been contagious. LaWana Darden is the best therapist I have had the privilege of working with. She has the unique ability to tow the line, hold someone accountable, communicate when their behavior is inappropriate and won't be tolerated, and then forgive them and give them a fresh slate the next day. She carries herself with balance, grace, and compassion. She is the epitome of what a strong woman is, and I can only hope that I raise my daughters to carry themselves so evenly. Learning from her has been a blessing. Drs. Dennis Sandrock and Harold Goldstein are two excellent psychologists whom I would trust with any client at any time. I refer to and consult with them more than any others. You would never know by looking at them that Dennis rides motocross and that Harold is a rock-climbing, mountain-biking, poison-ivy-wearing injury waiting to happen, but nothing slows either of them down. Thank you for helping me ferment my thinking about athletes over time.

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If there is one person in the world I want on my side when things are tough, it is my best friend, my brother, Adam Foresta. No one has stood by me, no questions asked, like you have. I will always be available to return the favor. You are my family and your family is my family.

I would like to thank my parents, Lloyd and Barbara Abrams, who are both gone from my physical presence but reside with me always—in my humor, in my head, and in my heart. I owe all that I am to you. Both of you always told me to let the world know what was on my mind. I hope that people are

thankful for your advice. You have inspired this book. I miss you both terribly. To my sister, Alicia, you were gone too soon, but I see you pop up in my daughters' faces, and it makes me smile.

Three girls are responsible for increasing my gray hairs and taking me on never-ending adventures: Lea Nicole, Melissa Brianne, and Aviva Elle. Lea, you have grown into a beautiful, well-mannered, intelligent young lady. I am proud of you and you will always be in my heart! Melissa, you are forever smiling and making everyone around you happy. I hope that you are always able to let things roll off your back and really enjoy life. Thank you for making my reflection look good. And then there is Aviva, our diva—you bring out the best in everyone around you. You follow your own rules yet are so easygoing. You make me smile every day, even on the hard ones. I am thankful for each of you individually and together. You inspire me to find new ways to make you laugh, show me time and again the value of play, and have even helped me learn better ways to control my own anger. You will have the best, I promise you that.

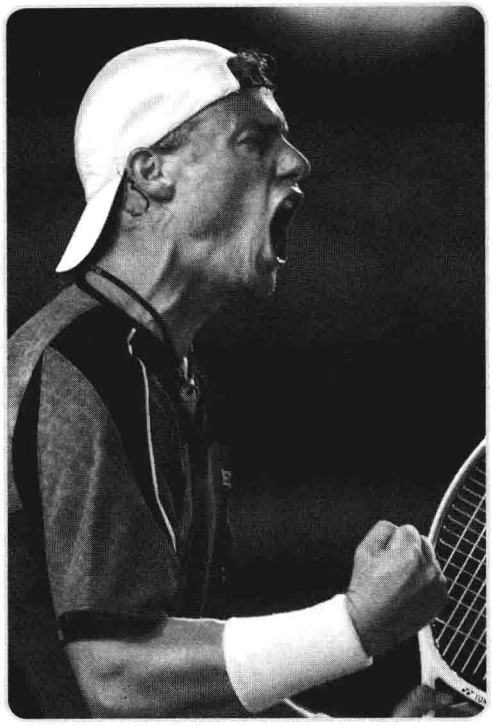
And last but not least, I would need another 200 pages to thank my beautiful wife, Christy. But in the simplest words, I could not have gotten here, and I would not have wanted to, without you. You have given me strength when I thought I had run out, you believed in me when I did not believe in myself, and you have stood beside me through difficult times. You have been a sounding board, a confidante, a teacher, and my inspiration. Thank you for understanding during all the times when I was working on this book instead of being with you, and for showing patience when you did not have to. Before anyone, this book would not have been possible without your support.

Contents

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF ANGER AND VIOLENCE IN SPORT

For every athlete associated with off-the-field violence, you can find 10 who have never been accused of anything as severe as stealing a pack of gum. For every athlete accused of violence, there is one who has never faced such allegations: For every Ray Lewis there is a Bruce Smith; for every Kobe Bryant there is a Michael Jordan; for every O.J. Simpson there is a Walter Payton; for every Ty Cobb there is a Cal Ripken; for every Marty McSorley there is a Wayne Gretzky. Yet despite the overwhelming number of innocent athletes, the perception is growing that athletes are more violent than nonathletes. Although some athletes engage in appalling behavior, you will be reminded throughout this book that sport is a microcosm of our society—that the violence that we see athletes engage in is a reflection of the overall hostility that pervades our culture. To clear the reputation of sport, intervention is needed. We must look at the issue objectively and realistically. This book does not espouse political correctness at the expense of accuracy. Instead, it challenges you to think about anger and sport in a new, more meaningful way.

When first examining the relationship between anger and sport, we may be tempted to subscribe to the media's portrayal of athletes as a particularly boisterous bunch. Accepting this as true, the idea of developing anger management programs could spring from the fantasy of preventing athletes from being arrested and winding up in jail. A more realistic appraisal, however, would lead us to realize that our prisons are not overrun with athletes. Not until after I completed my dissertation and left the academic world did I start to realize the value of anger management as a performance enhancement tool for athletes. In fact, the coaches and athletics directors who initially turned me away caused me to think about the topic further.



Anger, a normal emotion, can help an athlete's performance. This tennis player can use his anger as motivation and determination to improve his score and win the match.

They were afraid that I would turn their male athletes into a bunch of sissies. These athletes, they believed, needed their anger to be successful. Given the often-accepted analogy of sport and warfare, I had to stop and reconsider (a) why anyone would want to think about anger management for athletes and (b) what I was really trying to do by teaching athletes these skills.

The reasons to do this work are simple. First, anger is an emotion that, at high levels, interferes with peak performance in much the same way that anxiety does, yet only a fraction of the attention paid to anxiety has been directed to anger. Second, anger and violence are confusing constructs in sport. Differences of opinion have been further complicated by terminology problems. For this reason, discussion about the language used to describe this phenomenon is needed. Third, there is no reason to believe that all athletes have learned to manage their emotions when many people in our society have not. Finally, I wanted to understand (and then teach) why some athletes can harness their anger whereas others trip on it and self-destruct—either in their sport arena or outside it.

I believe that the idea that athletes are more violent than nonathletes is a myth. Whether you come to the same conclusion or not by the end of this book, I will help you understand how to manage any violence, including violence that comes up in sport. First, we must come to some agreement on language and terminology.

A NEW VERNACULAR

I believe that the definitions used in the sport psychology field regarding anger and violence require streamlining. As we go through relevant terminology and definitions that I think should be standardized (if for no other reason than to have pragmatic language that people can agree on), I will explain why I have made refinements to previously used terms.

Anger

Anger is a normal emotion. Anger is neither good nor bad, and no judgment need be attached to it. Some people believe that a problem arises if a person becomes angry. This idea is not true. To pass judgment on anger and condemn those who admit to becoming angry is the equivalent of robbing people of their humanness. Disallowing oneself from any part of the human experience weakens the experience in its totality. Sadness gives a reference point that makes happiness more appreciated. Tension can be better understood when compared with relaxation. It is about time we stopped making value judgments about anger. No one has ever gotten in trouble for becoming angry. You could be furious right now, but no one would know it unless you demonstrated some behavior associated with the anger. The belief that anger is bad is so strongly engrained that people will sometimes deny its existence even when it is spilling out all over the place. We have all heard someone with a red face expel incendiary words accompanied by saliva and then follow up by saying, "I am *not angry*!" The bad rap that anger has received has made it even more resistant to examination.

Truth be told, anger can be harnessed and used as fuel to assist in performance. Can it interfere with performance? You bet! Does it have to? Absolutely not. I have helped athletes compete harder with greater intensity for longer periods, motivated by their anger. The issue is not a matter of eliminating anger; it is a matter of keeping it at a level where it assists, not detracts from, performance.

Studies have shown that as anger increases, cognitive processing speed goes down, fine motor coordination and sensitivity to pain decrease, and muscle strength often increases. So for some athletes doing some tasks, anger can be helpful. For example, the defensive lineman who must make his way past a blocker to make a tackle might benefit from having some level of anger. For other tasks, anger would be a hindrance. The quarterback who needs to read the defense before deciding which receiver to throw to would likely perform better if he was not angry. In fact, some research supports this thesis. Players at football positions that require a lot of decision making tend to demonstrate lower levels of anger than players at positions that do not.

Therefore, when we talk about anger management for peak performance in sport, we are not always talking about making athletes polite and calm. Rather, we are referring to their ability to self-regulate their emotions to what their tasks require.

Aggression

What does it mean to be aggressive? Definitions that have permeated sport psychology for decades have stated that aggression has harm to another as a goal. It is no wonder that people frown on aggression in sport; it means that someone has to get hurt. This statement is not true. The adverb

aggressively describes the method by which people go after their goals. It refers to the tenacity, the hunger, and the determination that people embody when striving for accomplishments.

I checked: The women who succeeded on Wall Street climbed the corporate ladder aggressively. Success in life is not just handed to people. They have to want it. They have to go get it themselves. At the heart of Nike's "Just Do It" campaign is the idea of not waiting for it to come to you. Instead, you go from being passive to active and doing it yourself. Aggression is a necessary requirement for success in sport and in life in general.

Aggressive behavior can be broken down into various categories. The delineation that makes the most sense is that between instrumental aggression and reactive aggression.

Instrumental aggression is goal-directed aggression in which harm to another is not the primary goal, although it can be a secondary result of the action. In sport, an example would be the basketball player who slashes to the basket, leaps over a defender, and accidentally catches another defender with an elbow on the way up to scoring two points with a resounding dunk. The goal was to put the ball in the hole, not to harm an opponent. People who participate in sport know that injury is always a possibility. Accidental injuries happen. No blame should be assigned, and nothing in the rules of the game bans these incidents. Instrumental aggression is the hallmark for success in life and in sport and should be encouraged.

Some authors have described instrumental aggression as assertiveness. I believe that in making this distinction, psychologists are trying to soften things up in defense of the position that aggression is bad. Let us examine this for a moment. To be assertive is to stand up for one's rights. In fact, in the psychotherapy world, assertiveness training is used for people who have self-esteem problems. We teach them communication skills (we will revisit this topic later in the book) that will help them effectively and appropriately have their needs met.

To illustrate how assertiveness is not the same as instrumental aggression, consider the following: The tailback is 10 yards out from the goal line. Three defenders block the path between him and six points. Will he assertively communicate to his opponents, "Excuse me, gentlemen, would it be OK if you just acquiesced and allowed me to run past you? After all, it is my right to score this touchdown, you know"? Of course not! The tailback has no entitlement to score. He has no right to win. He succeeds only by aggressively going after his goal. So when you see the tailback launch his body through the air like a missile trying to bowl over the last defender after skillfully dancing his way between the other two, do not think assertive; think Walter Payton—aggressive.

But that is not the whole story on aggression. Another type of aggression is called reactive aggression, sometimes referred to as hostile aggression. Reactive aggression is behavior that has as its primary and sometimes solitary