

ATHLETIC INSIGHT

June, 1999
Volume 1, Issue 1

Aggression Among Athletes: An Asian versus American Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the differences between Asian and American athletes. Using questionnaire data from Asia and the U.S. , the author suggests that Asian athletes tend to be more perfectionistic, more work oriented, receive more family support, are more family oriented and tend to be less aggressive and less angry. Conversely, the American athlete appears to be more aggressive, less work-oriented, often complains more about practice, have looser family ties, and are less guilty about defeating opponents.

Introduction

This paper offers a discussion of the relationship between aggression and performance from a cross cultural perspective. Winning is considered the goal of sports. A significant component of the ability to win is aggression. There are many mechanisms involved both in the expression of aggression and its inhibition. Despite aggression's taboo nature, when I asked the American athletes why they play their sport, sixty percent of them said they enjoyed being competitive and aggressive. This paper will attempt to uncover the many psychological mechanisms needed for a player to maintain an aggressive attitude in order to win. The orientation is psychoanalytic, an approach that has been largely neglected in sport psychology. We will take a look at these processes cross culturally. The risk of cross cultural research is that cultural dynamics are so complex, it is virtually impossible to obtain sufficient data to make reasonable statements that are supported. However, when one compares two cultures, one gains insight into the differences and the mechanisms that go into winning. Firstly, we'll look at the athlete's drive states and observe cross cultural differences. We'll define the role of the oral, anal and phallic functioning regarding athletic performance and aggression. Secondly, we'll look at self issues, observe differences in independence and in self esteem between the

American and Japanese athlete. We'll consider the crucial importance of shame as it relates to performance and performance inhibition. Finally, we'll look at superego functioning in Japan and America, and explore how aggression and anger are handled in both countries as it relates to guilt.

Psychosexual Development, Athletics and Aggression

Dervin (1985) speculates that every play recapitulates the hallmark of the athletes' early development from the state of poise, to that of performance, and on to scoring. He states, "Plays open with the players stationary, but in a mobilized state of alertness, readiness and composure. It is the moment before the pitch, the face off, the jump ball, the serve, the kick off or pass or center. The players are poised." He and Rangell (1954) discussed poise as it relates to the earliest skills the infant displays in orality. Related to this, one can observe how frequently athletes have superstitions about food and orality. Some eat only certain foods. Japanese performers in America will often complain about the food, and it may be that the use and abuse of performance enhancing drugs in American athletes owes its cause to oral problems. What is the relationship between oral stage problems and drug use in athletes? Generally, the literature suggests that Japanese children are indulged orally for the first six years of life. These findings were partially supported by my data which suggested that the Japanese athlete was indulged during childhood. As a result, these Japanese athletes may not be as deprived of oral needs, and might have less a tendency to use and abuse performance enhancement drugs.

Stage II of psychosexual development is the anal stage. Here the child first learns to perform and carry through on a task demanded by the parent. With regard to athletic play, the anal stage is activated when the ball is put into play. The play itself animates the player, they perform and enter the world of limits and demands of correct playing where others observe and judge their performance. They must not break rules. Here we begin to see cross-cultural differences. Perfectionism and obsessive intellectual concern over details are personality traits in the anal stage. The perfectionist is making efforts to gain control over the anal process. As adults they translate this anal control into athletic obsessiveness, where they attempt to control the body itself. There is significant literature that discusses the Japanese tendency towards perfectionism. Anyone observing the Nagano Olympic games this year will attest to that. Japanese excel at golf and figure skating, as well as baseball

My questionnaire data revealed that of the 14 Japanese athletes interviewed, 85 admitted to workaholism. This included professional golfers and ping pong players. By contrast, only 50 of the American professional admitted to workaholism. Many of the Japanese athletes practice as much as 10 hours a day. Pearl Sinn, a regular on the LPGA golf tour is originally from South Korea, works out 4 hours per day as an example of this behavior. This quality of Japanese obsessiveness is theorized to stifle creativity, individuality and aggression. Sachio Kinogasa, third base superstar of the Hiroshima Carp has said that Japanese baseball is characterized by long, conservatively played games, that use bunting as the favorite strategy. This phenomena suggests a culture that may best be characterized as fixated in anality or control.

Perfectionism, anality and control encourages great athletic development, but it does not guarantee winning. There is a big difference between athletic skill and the ability to win, as any professional athlete will tell you. One could make the argument and find support from professional athletes that the attitude towards winning is more important than skill development itself. Just think for a moment about golf superstars and what their swings look like. Lee Trevino, Chi Chi Rodriguez, Ray Floyd and Tom Kite are four examples of people that have a great ability to win without perfectionistic swings. The anal athlete is one who practices a lot, has tremendous skill development, but just can't seem to win.

The third psychosexual stage of development is the phallic stage. This is the phase in childhood where the child vies for the sexual trophies. This is the Oedipus crisis, and during it, the child learns to master competitiveness and aggression in order to obtain the pleasures of love. In sports, this phase is reflected in the ability to handle aggression, overcome guilt and obtain success

A review of sports headlines supports these findings. American athletes are known to be promiscuous and aggressive. John Benedict's (1997) book on athletes and aggression, supports this finding by suggesting how frequently the American athlete is charged with sexual assault. With regard to Olympic performance, one need only think of the most significant U.S. story to come out of Nagano. The U.S. Hockey team lost and then trashed their hotel room, displaying the mean spirited, overly aggressive attitude Americans are so well known for. While off the field, phallic fixation produces scandalous headlines and six million incidents of wife beating per year in America. On the field, Americans in all likelihood benefit from this fixation. American's ability to be openly aggressive with little or no conflicts about it, allows them to focus, score and win with little guilt or anxiety. The Japanese, with their group orientation and patriarchal societal structure, may be encumbered regarding their ability to compete and be aggressive. We will see later in this paper, that the ability to win has some negative and some positive consequences.

Performance and Self Issues

When we discuss self issues and winning, we introduce concepts such as independence, boundary establishment and self esteem. Independence is a basic concept in American psychology. The establishment of the self occurs around age 4 and consists of successfully separating from the mother in order to establish an individuated and independent self. Trouble in development produces what we call narcissism or borderline disorders. People with poor self definition and problems with dependency are considered narcissistic. Many professional athletes in America are considered narcissists, extremely dependent upon crowds to fuel an empty inner self. For our purposes, we want to attempt to make some cross cultural statements about narcissism in Japan and America's athletes, and connect this with the ability to win.

Many writers are aware of the problem the Japanese have in separating from their mothers. The Shinkeishitsu personality was first detailed by Morita (Lee, 1997) and is

characterized by perfectionism, compulsivity and shyness. This is said to be derived from strong, familial and maternal expectations to be successful. These men project their need to be harmonious and cooperative, and feel very guilty when they are aggressive. This syndrome is said to lead to parental abuse, especially in teenage boys who beat up their mothers. These teens are dependent on mothers and incorporate her expectations then become enraged over failure and entrapment.

Masterson (1985) has written about the Japanese problem with dependency, characterizing them as hidden narcissists, who have fused with the mother for the first six years, and then were abandoned by her through shame tactics. We want to delineate this dependent personality structure and how it influences winning. Winning is an interpersonal experience. Winning takes aggression, and this aggression must be controlled by inner focus, and the ability to separate from your opponent. One needs inner permission to win and the ability to give someone else the pain of loss. These highly interpersonal experiences are profoundly impacted by the structure of personality. If someone is dependent, that means they are not individuated. They see themselves as half units with the other in the environment as the other half. If one can not separate and maintain boundaries, it is difficult to want to win, since winning may imply leaving the dual unity. Many players have encountered conflicts about winning as a result of dependency issues.

Cross culturally we see no difference between American and Asian orientation to family. My data suggests that 80 of the U.S. athletes feel that family is key, and 71 of the Japanese feel family life is key. To the extent that this has meaning, it suggests that the dependent type is encumbered by these interpersonal commitments, which in all likelihood inhibit winning. One is reminded of Ben Hogan's tremendous self-centeredness and disregard for others. The story of his playing with someone who made a hole in one at Augusta on #12 while he made a birdie and commented to the player: "That's the first time I've ever made birdie there." Selfish and self-centeredness is fostered by the Swedish sport psychologist, Nielson, with good effects for Anika Sorenstam. She recommends no comments following opponent's shot, in order to foster separateness and inner focus and to remove the game from the interpersonal level. Interventions that foster feelings of independence would help both American and Japanese athletes that are struggling with dependency. This may be even more crucial for women, who are considered as more interpersonally related than men (Lee, 1997).

Guilt and Winning

The superego is the unconscious mechanism in the psyche that contains our values, ideals, self demands and our need for punishment. The superego is first developed with identification with parents in early childhood. This aspect of the superego elicits rage against the self for making mistakes. Later on, providing that the culture has appropriate models of authority, the child learns to identify with them and their values. This identification tends to be more mature, reasonable and easy to live up to. My data shows the following: American athletes report either a good upbringing (50) or a chaotic upbringing (30). In contrast, no Japanese athlete reported chaos in their upbringing, and

the largest loading was with the surprising finding that they were brought up both strictly and in an indulged way. This bimodal comment suggests as Masterson commented, that the Japanese are raised indulgently for the first 6 years, and then dropped by the mother, leaving them narcissistically damaged and forever avoidant of intimacy.

On a cultural level in America, we see 30 years of constant devaluation of all authority. This has resulted in the lack of ego ideals or heroes to identify with. The athlete and others are forced to revert to primitive superego judgment that produces severe self punishment. In all likelihood, this is why we see so many drug addicted athletes, who use drugs to undo their anger and rage at themselves. The Japanese athlete is far different and anyone with a cursory awareness will see that. They are more controlled, less aggressive and calmer. An American athlete in Asia commented they seem to be very serene and mystical when you compete against them. Sumo wrestlers are a good metaphor for this mentality. Steeped in tradition and protocol, these gentle giants are reserved, in good control and self punishing. In America, we have no such elements. We see narcissistic athletes that are independent, have failed to find appropriate ego ideals, and are left to judge for themselves what is right and wrong. We see ample confusion in this area for American sports. The Sprewell choking incident, with the player losing control and choking a coach is a perfect symbol for the American athlete who is aggressive, angry and out of control. I believe this is the major vulnerability we see in the American athlete's psychology. These athletes are undeniably more phallic and less troubled with ideas of separation and winning. However, they are angry and have more of a tendency to lose control of this anger. Whether that is in the Roberto Alomar spitting incident, the Olympic incidents already mentioned (the U.S. hockey team) or Mike Tyson biting the ear off of Evander Holyfield. The American athlete suffers from superego deficits that make him vulnerable to rage and impulsivity. The establishment of greater social order and role models is necessary, but not easy to develop in a culture with a history of devaluing authority. Violence in the coaching profession is probably a reflection of this problem right now.

On the other hand, the strength in the Japanese athlete is seen in their superego functioning which produces greater calmness and less anger in them. They may be less subject to scandals, promiscuity, drug abuse and injury prone impulsivity as well. The Japanese's greatest problem appear to be aggressive inhibition. They are still encumbered by fused states with parents and a feeling of shame. This serves to produce excessive guilt and fear of winning as a result. Protocols that foster aggression and independence are surely needed.

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