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## Deviant Behaviour in Competitive Sport. A Sociological Attempt at Explaining the Phenomenon

Zbigniew Dziubinski

*Jozef Pilsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Poland, [zdziubinski@wp.pl](mailto:zdziubinski@wp.pl)*

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## Abstract

This article seeks to use selected sociological theories to account for the phenomenon of deviance in sport. Two main theoretical approaches are employed herein: the functionalist/structuralist approach and symbolic interactionism. The analysis that follows leads to the conclusion that deviance which occurs in sport is predominantly a consequence of deviance in modern societies. Sport, in turn, is just a convenient area for deviant behaviours to be manifested, which often happens more clearly and conspicuously than in societies.

## Keywords

deviance, explanatory theories, competitive sport

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**Deviant Behaviour in Competitive Sport****A Sociological Attempt at Explaining the Phenomenon<sup>1</sup>**

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A – Study Design  
B – Data Collection  
C – Statistical Analysis  
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G – Funds Collection

**Zbigniew Dziubiński**

Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Poland

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Dr hab. prof. AWF Zbigniew Dziubiński

Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education, Department of Sociology, 00-968 Warszawa 45, Poland, ul. Marymoncka 34

Phone: +4822 839 44 10, e-mail: zdziubinski@wp.pl

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## Introduction

As we follow sport events, we can clearly see that almost every day athletes, coaches, sport activists and sport club owners behave in ways which contravene certain codes of conduct in sport as well as standards of social life. A player hits another one in the game field, somebody gets caught using prohibited pharmaceuticals, hooligans beat up a referee and vandalise a stadium, somebody misappropriates a sport club's funds, and so on. Even though we condemn this kind of behaviour and might be even afraid of it, we need to realise that such incidents cannot be prevented and in a way, they are bound to happen in contemporary sport. We cannot even hope that the number of deviant and criminal behaviours will ever decrease. However, if we understand the reasons why such incidents occur, we may perhaps be able to control the rate at which their numbers increase.

This article seeks to understand deviant behaviours in sport and identify their causes. At first, it will try to clarify what deviance is and list possible theoretical approaches to accounting for the phenomenon of social deviance. Then, it will analyse the most frequent kinds of deviant behaviour in sport by adopting two basic research perspectives, namely, the functionalist/structuralist theory and symbolic interactionism. At the end, the article will discuss the destructive effect of deviance in sport and show possible ways to prevent deviance.

## Understanding deviance

Deviance, from Latin *devio*, stands for deviation, stepping off the right way, turning away from the right direction and not acting in conformity with norms and values accepted in a given community. Deviant behaviours are those which cannot be considered conforming. Situations of this kind are often referred to in terms of social pathology and social disorganisation.

The notion of deviance was introduced in American sociology in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, addressing the need to systematise and provide a more precise description of phenomena and social processes which differed from the norm. Earlier, issues of deviance had been studied by Florian Znaniecki, but in his inquiries, he used the rather judgmental Polish word *zboczenie* (closer to “perversion” than “deviation”) [1, p. 125].

While he never used the term itself, Emile Durkheim [2] investigated issues of deviant behaviour at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a book entitled *Rules of the Sociological Method*. In the book, he delivered an exhaustive lecture on the criteria that determined which social facts were normal and which abnormal. He also gave a profound analysis of the genesis and function of behaviours which differed from normative standards.

The fundamental criterion to categorise a phenomenon or a process as deviant is the “norm”, which in many cases is defined by regulations, while in others, it is a matter of social contract. Most societies regard murder, assault, seizure of property and rape as deviant behaviour. Violations of other regulations are considered divergence from the norm as well and include traffic offences, hacking into other people's computer data or breaking the terms and conditions of a student hostel.

It is much more difficult to define what kinds of behaviour are regarded as social deviance. What makes it so difficult is that while such behaviour does not contravene legal norms, it does social norms. The latter are historically and culturally variable. The cult of God is accompanied by different types of behaviour in traditional African communities and different in modern societies. The conduct of the former would be considered deviant when transferred to the realities of the latter and vice versa.

As we discuss the norm in the context of social deviance, we encounter a problem when we try to answer the fundamental question of what the norm exactly is and what is divergent from the

norm. It is particularly difficult to determine the norm in modern societies whose characteristic features include the atomisation of society members, individualisation, a lesser role of families and local communities, different socialisation paths, diverse cultural influences and a multitude of religions, churches and so on.

Opinions differ as to whether the term deviance should only apply to what we might call negative behaviours, such as murder, seizure of property and so on. After all, positive behaviours such as extreme kindness, understanding, devotion, love and so on might be considered deviant as well. Could John Paul II be possibly described as a deviant because he connected with and worked for the poor, the disadvantaged, the marginalized and the persecuted to a much greater extent than others did? Or perhaps the term should be also used with reference to an American swimmer Michael Phelps who won eight gold medals at the Olympic Games in Beijing?

It is unclear what the limits of tolerance are for different kinds of human behaviour. Surely, slight deviation from the norm will not meet with any sharp social reaction. The same is true when such deviation concerns an insignificant affair. The age of the person violating a norm plays a part in the social response. In all societies, children usually enjoy a very wide margin of tolerance. The margin also depends on the size of a given community. Small groups, such as a family, have much less tolerance than big urban communities and multiethnic metropolitan areas. The limits of tolerance also depend on a person's social status, the role they play in a community and, last but not least, the social context. Killing a human being is subject to the highest possible punishment in modern societies; however, in the context of a war, killing people is often desirable and even rewarded in many different ways after the war is over [3].

The interpretation of deviance depends on how we perceive humans as such. If we accept that people are inherently evil, asocial, egocentric and driven by particularistic interests, the deviance in their behaviour is perceived as a lack of efficient social control the goal of which is to contain natural inclinations. In this situation, research focuses on accounting for conventional behaviours rather than deviant ones. When, on the other hand, we assume that, by natural or divine law, people are good, righteous, honest, pro-social and pro-normative, our assumption points our attention to explaining abnormal and non-conforming behaviours.

Sociology and science in general do not only seek to describe phenomena and processes which deviate from social norms, but also to explain why a majority of people abide by the norm, while some choose to violate it.

### **Theoretical perspectives in explaining deviance**

The functionalist/structuralist perspective offers a fully sociological approach to the studies of deviant behaviour, or more precisely, the causes of such behaviour. In the light of this theory, the social structure with its systems of norms, values, roles, attitudes and so on is something to be taken for granted, something external and treated as objective reality. When people enter this structure and assume certain functions, they change nothing in the structure and only inherit, take over and internalise all they find there and what is given to them. The entry into the structure and functions usually happens through socialisation. We know, however, that some society members refuse to accept the norms which they encounter or are bestowed with. Such people behave in non-conforming ways. To a sociologist, it is interesting to identify the reasons why individuals or communities contravene norms and values shared by the public at large.

Robert Merton developed a theory to account for the influence which anomy had on deviant behaviour. He sought to answer the question how certain social structures pressed on individuals and communities and, consequently, made them inclined to manifest unconventional and deviant

behaviour rather than behaviour complying with norms [4, p. 196]. Merton came to the conclusion that the cause of deviance was to be found in the relation between values shared by all and behaviours aimed at attaining such shared values. In each and every society, some values are the ultimate goal of human pursuit. For example, people want to be rich, well-educated and have access to power. As far as being rich is concerned, in order to achieve the goal one needs to show initiative, work hard, have intellectual capital and so on. Good education takes perseverance in learning and steady advancement up the career ladder in education. In the third case, achieving the goal requires the skill to use one's knowledge, eloquence and charisma to convince electors they want to vote for "me." In a society, the majority shares the values of wealth, education and power, but not everybody accepts the road leading to the values when it requires one to abide by the law and social norms.

The theory of conflict takes directly from the basic guidelines of the theory of Marx. In their research, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton and Jock Young [5] established that deviance was a deliberate choice which on many occasions was of a political character. They rejected claims that deviance was determined by factors such as genetic predispositions, anomie and social structure, and instead they asserted that deviance was a deliberate response to inequality inherent in the capitalist system. Theoreticians of new criminology analyse crime and deviance in terms of social structure and the determination of dominant social classes to retain authority.

Discussing theories accounting for deviance, this paper has so far presumed, perhaps after Marx, but unlike Durkheim, that people are inherently good, righteous, pro-normative and pro-social. Consequently, the question has been why people violate norms. Let us now reverse the situation and adopt a new research perspective by supposing that by their very nature, people are egoistic and pursue personal benefits and in doing so, they act rationally. This way, when an individual notices an opportunity to attain important values, the opportunity is motivating enough to act non-conformingly and show deviant behaviour. Especially when according to the individual, the action is unlikely to be uncovered or the penalty for it is disproportionate to the benefits to be achieved.

Any defect of social control results in weaker social control in general, no matter if it is caused by disturbed socialisation processes or changes that weaken social control from the outside. Such changes occur, for example, in modern societies as a result of the disintegration of families, neighbourhoods and local communities. Weaker social control almost always leads to stricter formal control, executed by agencies appointed by society, including city patrol force, police, courts of law, penal institutions and so on. Despite such measures, processes like these almost always result in more deviance and poorer axionormative order [6].

When adopting the functionalist/structuralist outlook and different theories accommodated in it to analyse deviance, this paper has so far focused on reasons why individuals and communities depart from social patterns and norms. Let us now look at deviance from the angle of symbolic interactionism which first and foremost gives attention to the image of a society as recognised by individuals. In symbolic interactionism, deviance is not a result of a behaviour's departing from socially accepted norms, but it is what people respond to as deviant. Seen this way, deviance is not a departure from or a violation of rules; it is what people consider to be deviant. No actions are deviant per se. Why, then, does one behaviour or another become recognised as deviant? Why are certain individuals and communities labelled deviants and others are not?

The perception of deviance is of a societal character. To a large extent, the evaluation of deviant behaviours depends on different groups of influential people who interpret deviant behaviours to suit their own interests. A good example of such influence is the selective attitude to

substances such as coffee, cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Drinking alcohol and coffee is not a criminal offence, whereas the use of marijuana is. Some of the aforementioned substances are considered legal, because they have been acknowledged as present in society and used by groups of high social standing, whereas drug abuse is the domain of communities which are low in the social structure.

In the course of his research, Edwin H. Sutherland established that people learned deviant behaviour by interacting with other people. Sutherland coined the term of diversified ties, which allowed him and other interactionists to explore the phenomenon of deviance more profoundly. Sutherland assumed that some social milieus favoured conforming behaviour, while others did the opposite and gravitated towards non-conformist behaviour. People become deviants because they acquire deviant behaviours in the process of socialisation, especially primary socialisation in peer groups [7].

Thanks to Howard Becker, Edwin Lamert and others, in the 1960s American sociology worked out the theory of social stigmatisation. In the light of this theory, rather than a range of features characterising an individual or a community, deviance is the interaction between deviants and non-deviants [8].

We all occasionally happen to behave in ways which contradict the norm and in most cases, we get away with such behaviour. This type of behaviour is called primary deviance. Not everybody is labelled a deviant afterwards, but once they are, the label sets off a process of acquiring a new role, that of a deviant. The social milieu then uses all means available to stereotype the person into the role and so begins a deviant career.

The aforementioned Howard Becker came to the conclusion that a deviant identity was not shaped by deviant motivation or behaviour, but by the labelling process. Once a person is labelled deviant, his/her position in a community changes immediately and the community begins to have different expectations of the person than those of other community members. The social environment expects the individual to act in deviant ways and such behaviour is not perceived as normal, whereas normal, non-deviant behaviour is treated as deviant. This way, prompted by the social environment, a new deviant identity is formed.

The society expects deviants to engage in deviant acts, or even more so, it demands that they behave like that, because normalcy criteria towards the deviant role have been altered. A deviant's behaviour that violates the norm is considered normal and vice versa, when a deviant behaves in compliance with the norm, the society considers such attitude deviant. The circle is full and it is hard to find a way out to allow the deviant to shake off the role and change the public's attitude to a deviant person.

### **A functionalist/structuralist analysis of deviance in sport**

Sport is where deviance occurs in forms that are typical of societies in general, but certain kinds of deviance may be considered unique to sport.

Deviance typical of societies and found in sport includes the gravest kinds such as murder, rape, assault, mugging, burglary, robbery and arson. There are also milder offences, including gambling, public drunkenness, prostitution, illegal drug abuse and adultery. Deviant behaviours characteristic of sport, in turn, are such phenomena as hooliganism at stadiums, pharmacological doping, aggression, excessive amounts of money, bribery, racism and so-called white-collar crime.

The most famous theory which associates deviance with anomy, the theory of Robert Merton, can be used to account for deviance in sport. All athletes who deal with competitive sports pursue certain values to which they sometimes subordinate their lives entirely. Such values in sport

include medals, records, prizes, media attention, fame and so on. In order to attain the values, athletes need to possess important characteristics of biological, physiological, social, economic and organisational nature. In the pursuit of the values, they also need to spend many years in painstaking and tough training. From time to time, there occur individuals and communities that share the above values but are reluctant to follow socially acceptable paths, and instead they choose innovative solutions which are not accepted by the sport community. In cases like these, some of these people use barred holds when they fight, deliver blows which are in breach of regulations and engage in brutal competition. Some others pursue victory by resorting to bribery and corrupting people who can influence the end results. Another group choose to use prohibited pharmaceuticals. It is worth mentioning the characteristic example of performance-enhancing drugs used by athletes from the former East Germany. Female swimmers from that country won nine in 13 events at the Olympic Games in Seoul, owing their success to blue pills with the male hormone turinabol, produced in Jena especially for athletes.

Merton's theory also makes it possible to account for aggressive acts of vandalism performed by sport fans and hooligan supporters for whom the success of their favourite team is an absolute value. When the team is unable to win playing by the rules of sport competition, hooligan supporters resort to unlawful means and attack fans of the rival team, destroy property and mug innocent passers-by. Such hooligan supporters crave even a semblance of success, which they achieve by showing off their domination beyond sport [9].

The theory also explains the attitude of candidates for organisers of the Olympic Games who resorted to means that are commonly considered unacceptable. The candidates tried to achieve their goal through corruption. A corruption scandal involving six members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was connected to the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, USA. When the capital city of the state of Utah carried out a campaign to have the Olympics organisation awarded to it, relatives of six African IOC members were granted scholarships at American universities. The cost of the scholarship was said to total around \$500,000.

Another useful theory to account for deviant behaviour says that deviance is a result of inefficient mechanisms of social control. Under this theory, people are guided by egoistic interests in their conduct. When they see that the social control system is defective, they assume that deviance is highly likely to remain undetected and so they engage in deviant actions aimed at satisfying their own needs. This theory can explain why prohibited performance-enhancing drugs are used. Coaches, doctors and athletes are perfectly aware that it is forbidden to use pharmaceutical doping, but they also know that not all cases of doping get detected. Consequently, they understand they can regard formal control in this area as inefficient and so they take the risk, confident their deviant conduct will never get uncovered.

The theory of conflict can also be useful in accounting for deviance in sport. In the classic, Marxist conception, conflicts arise between those who own means of production and those who do not. An example here are strikes of basketball players in the National Basketball Association in the USA and Canadian hockey players of the National Hockey League (NHL), who refused to play in protest against unfair distribution of revenues. When NBA league owners cut the salary cap, basketball players who went on strike completely disorganised matches in the 1998/1999 season.

### **Deviance in sport from the perspective of symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism offers a different outlook on deviance in sport than this paper has presented so far. This perspective does not deliver a ready system of accepted norms and social



patterns. Instead, it looks at deviance as a social construct; namely, deviance is what people consider to be deviant.

The notion of deviance changes both in time and space and depends on social classes and structures. Athletic standards from post-war Poland would be interpreted as deviance if transferred to contemporary sport. This can be said about outfits in which athletes compete, techniques used in, for example, high jump, and even the very course of athletic training. This also applies to the Olympic movement which used to protect the purity of sport by deeming deviant and criminal cases of accepting financial reward for participation in competitions and good results in sport [10, pp. 71-74].

Sport reveals the process of deviant labelling too. A deviant label triggers a deviant career in the course of which an athlete, a coach or a club owner gets fixed in his or her deviance by being expected, or even demanded, to manifest deviant behaviours. Many football teams have players who are branded brutal. In cases like these, the people around them require such players to prove their brutality in every match. What is more, coaches often instruct the players to eliminate the rival team's best player from the game. For example, the coach of the Italian team gave defender Claudio Gentile the following instruction before a match against Argentina: "Stick to Maradona like a postage stamp, don't let him touch the ball. Use all it takes, grab him, scratch him and even bite him. And if he still escapes you, think of your country, pull out a knife and kill him" (*Sportowiec* 1986). A player like that is obliged to play brutally. When he plays a normal match like all the others, then the rest of the team, backed by supporters, impose a sanction on him in form of jokes, ridicule and quite often insults.

In a way, the labelling theory can be useful in accounting for hooligan conduct of football supporters. Hooligan supporters of individual football clubs are subject to the labelling process, but it has to be said that in this case, supporters themselves aspire to be branded, for example, the most brutal ones. Hooligan league tables are compiled and hooligan firms established and they regard such stigmatisation as a major distinction and honour. Taking the lead in these dishonourable standings motivates such individuals to engage in even more brutal acts. In the course of its deviant career, a hooligan community keeps on proving its deviant conduct: sport event organisers summon law-enforcement agencies, columns of police cars drive up to stadiums with policemen armed with helmets, shields, truncheons and firearms. Trains carrying football supporters are escorted by the police from the point of departure to the end station and then the supporters are further escorted from the station to the venue. Stadiums are fitted with surveillance cameras recording what is going on in the stands and around. A lot of other security operations are launched, causing a sense of expectation for deviant behaviour of hooligan supporters [11].

The above attempt at classifying ways to account for deviance in sport can by no means be considered complete. Relying on individual theories, it only outlines possible ways of explaining diverse types of deviance which occur in sport. Explication of social phenomena and processes, deviance included, should not employ just one theoretical perspective, but a wide range of different perspectives, for almost every social phenomenon and process is determined by a number variables which, when identified, may bring the desired research results.

### **The destructive role of deviance in sport**

Deviance in sport predominantly has a negative and destructive effect and generally speaking, it leads to social losses [12]. The losses can be divided into the following three groups:

- injury or loss of life;
- costs incurred by private persons, local governments and the central government;

- losses which cause the axionormative order to decline, which consequently encourages individuals and communities to non-conforming behaviours.

Nearly all modern and pre-modern societies embrace life and health as fundamental values. The penal codes of all countries inflict the highest punishments, including death penalty and life sentence, on those who take somebody's life or ruin their health. Deviance which occurs in sport prompts the reflection that sport is becoming a contradiction of itself, especially in the wake of tragic events. Sport is a product of culture, that is, it was invented by man to foster human development, and yet, it is now becoming a threat to humanity. A proof of this were acts of football hooliganism at the Heysel stadium in Brussels in 1985, when 39 Italian supporters lost their lives during the Liverpool vs. Juventus match of the European Cup finals. It was the worst tragedy caused by football hooliganism in the recent years.

Deviant behaviour of football fans and the resulting destruction of private and public property are a commonly known fact. Seats ripped up at stadiums, vandalised bus stops and city buses, havoc at railway stations, trains, pubs and bars and wrecked cars are all frequent images of the aftermath of what hooligan supporters can do. One of the many examples was the misbehaviour of English football fans during the semi-finals of the Euro 96 European Football Championships in England. When England played against Germany, 2,000 supporters, most of them under the influence of alcohol, came to Trafalgar Square and smashed up cars with German licence plates and police patrol cars. The riots ended in 40 wrecked cars, seven vandalised buildings, 25 injured policemen and 23 injured civilians. Eighteen people were killed. The damage cost £20 million to remove.

Deviance in sport *thus* causes loss of financial resources which instead could be used to invest in the development of sport, cities, regions and countries. Another well-known type of deviant behaviour is white-collar crime, that is, offences committed by members of the middle and upper classes. Through misappropriation and embezzlement of funds, such people expose organisations, the central government and local governments to losses. For example, the managers of FC Spartak Moscow, including the club's current coach and former president Oleg Romantsev, embezzled \$7 million in 2003, which was revealed by the NTV TV channel in Russia. Fraud also took place when Dmitriy Aleinichev was transferred to FC Roma (for \$11 million) in 1998.

Deviant behaviours in sport, mostly cases of misbehaving supporters, also cause losses resulting from the decline of the general axionormative order. Accounting for this phenomenon, one can be aided by a slightly modified version of what is known as the theory of broken windows. In the light of this theory, there is a connection between the general situation in a social environment and deviant behaviours that occur in it. When individuals and communities see damage and devastation that are not immediately repaired or when they see or learn about the behaviour of hooligans that caused the damage, without the perpetrators ever being penalised, they feel emboldened, if not encouraged, to show deviant behaviour themselves. That consequently causes the axionormative order to decline.

Athletes behave in a similar fashion. For example, when a referee fails to make the right decision when an athlete does not play fair, when no reprimand is given and a player is not removed from the field, the axionormative order declines and foul play intensifies. This also applies to the use of performance-enhancing drugs. When a person knows that his/her fellow athletes use such drugs and the practice never meets with formal sanctions, he/she feels encouraged to act similarly and is confident to get away with his/her deviant behaviour. Things did not, however, work that way for Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson, who was caught using performance-enhancing drugs

after his victory in the final 100 metre race during the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988. The gold medal was taken away from him and given to Carl Lewis (USA) who had not met with a similar sanction. However, in 2003 Wade Exum, a former employee of the US Olympic Committee, revealed that Lewis's test results had come out positive in 1988 as well, but the affair was subsequently covered up.

The broken windows theory can also come in helpful in accounting for xenophobic, chauvinist and racist behaviour. When such behaviour is never condemned, hooligan supporters feel encouraged to escalate it.

### **Ways to prevent deviant behaviour in sport**

Deviant behaviour in sport can be regarded as a sign that the socialisation process is failing. This means that first in primary and then secondary socialisation, participants of the process never manage to sufficiently internalise the norms and behavioural patterns shared by the society. They also fail to sufficiently acquire the norms and values which underlie sport and which are the underpinnings of Neo-Olympism.

Deviant behaviour in sport also testifies to unsuccessful social control, both formal control and, first and foremost, informal. In the case of individuals who show deviant behaviour, the two processes – socialisation and social control – have evidently failed to bring results in form of internal control, that is, an inner imperative to behave conventionally [13, pp. 7-11].

What can be done, then, to moderate the occurrence of deviant behaviour in sport? One of the available measures, largely accepted by public order agencies in almost all countries, are operations conducted by the police and other policing services established to prevent deviance. When necessary, such services are supposed to use force and then inflict punishment for criminal deeds. It has to be said that in many cases, such an action is necessary and services established to keep public order are obliged to act.

Another method are long-term preventive activities. This method seeks to consolidate and create conditions that foster proper functioning of such fundamental agents of socialisation as family, neighbourhood, local community, religious community, school and so on. These agents are evidently weaker in the decadent phase of modern society and along with them, vital social control has weakened as well. As part of this method, action is taken to restrict influences of deviant groups and counterculture. Such activities include support for reasonable communities that emerge, associations and foundations that seek to solve various significant problems in society. It is also important to reduce the impact of the counterculture of athletes and hooligan supporters. This counterculture offers a socialisation process which is contradictory to the norm and behavioural patterns in the general public. Finally, preventive activities aim to reduce the counter-socialising role of mass media. This is to be achieved by eliminating primitivism and brutality, words of aggression and intolerance and, last but not least, military terminology that may give the impression that sport competition is a decisive factor in the future of societies and states. This language of aggression and war is exemplified by what Tomas Pacesas, a player of the Prokom-Trefl Sopot football team, once said: "The finals are a war-like game. You have to go there and kill the opponent! You have to want to die for victory, because then you are sure to win" [14, p. 186].

In conclusion, it has to be said that we all violate norms and behavioural patterns at one point or another. No society has ever managed to avoid deviance nor is any sport discipline free from it, although the intensity of deviance varies a lot. It is impossible to accomplish sport utopia free from deviance, frauds, embezzlers, hooligans and so on. Sport can never become an enclave of happiness, righteousness and good. It is impossible to shield sport from the influence of processes

and phenomena that occur in the public at large. “Sport mirrors society,” writes S.D. Eitzen. “Sport suffers from the same ailments that consume the society it exists in. When the society is divided and troubled by poverty and racism, athletic competition will not only become a way of escape, but it can also become a battlefield. Societal violence will beget sport violence” [15, p. 412].

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