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Praveen
DPE, GSSS, Khanpur Kalan,
Sonipat



Praveen

Correspondence:
Praveen
DPE, GSSS, Khanpur Kalan,
Sonipat

An Impact of Aggression on Sports Performance

Praveen

Abstract

Whilst in many sports the use of legitimate force is within the rules of the game. This assertiveness is required in many sports where a degree of physicality is required for success. Whether in ice hockey or soccer, the hustle and bustle between players will always remain a key part of the sport's nature. As frustration on field (or off) often leads to hostile aggression this can heighten levels of physical arousal which can be productive to improved performance in some sports or take them out of their zone of optimum functioning for arousal.

On a regular basis, when we watch or take part in sports we're exposed to acts of aggression. Whether it's the young soccer player who decides to make a vicious tackle against the defender whose play have been frustrating him all game, or watching archive coverage of the legendary Lawrence Taylor sacking another Quarterback. Sport is full of acts of aggression.

This article hopes to provide insights into the effects of aggression on sporting performance by providing an insight into the subject through sports psychology, as well as addressing the effect that an audience can have on performance in terms of whether a home court, field or stadium can make a noticeable difference to team or individual performances.

Keywords: Aggression, Environmental Temperature and Fear of Retaliation.

Introduction

Aggression is overt, often harmful, social interaction with the intention of inflicting damage or other unpleasantness upon another individual. It is a virtually universal behaviour among animals. It may occur either in retaliation or without provocation. In humans, frustration due to blocked goals can cause aggression. Submissiveness may be viewed as the opposite of aggressiveness.

The initiation of an attack with the intent to injure" (Bredemeier, 1983) "A sequence of behaviour in which the goal is to injure another person" (Dollard *et al.*, 1939) "A behaviour directed against a living target, in which there is a probability greater than zero of imparting a noxious stimulus" (Kaufman, 1970) "Any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another being who is motivated to avoid such treatment" (Baron, 1977)

In definitions commonly employed in the social sciences and behavioural sciences, aggression is a response by an individual that delivers something unpleasant to another person. Some definitions include that the individual must intend to harm another person. Predatory or defensive behaviour between members of different species may not be considered aggression in the same sense.

Situational Factors Which Influence Sporting Aggression

In terms of sport-specific aggressive behaviour a large proportion of the research carried out has been related to situation specific factors. (Cox 1998) ^[9]

1. Environmental Temperature
2. Perception of a Victim's Intent
3. Fear of Retaliation
4. Structure of the Game

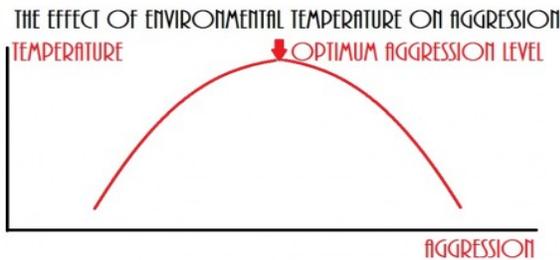


The Effect of Environmental Temperature on Aggression

We can all feel a degree of frustration when the mercury rises significantly as conditions become uncomfortable. Baron and Bell (1976) [1] found that by taking a cooling drink reduced the impact of high ambient temperatures on aggression levels.

In laboratory based experiments the effect of environmental temperature has been found to be curvilinear with performance levels increasing to an optimum point before a visible decrease in performance as shown below.

Temperature Effect on Aggression Level



Perception of a Victim's Intent in Sport

As a general rule: If an athlete perceives their opponents intent is to cause harm or injury they are more inclined to act with aggression towards their opponent. If a rugby player thinks that their opponent's rough and overly physical play is intended towards causing harm to them their response will potentially be influenced by their level of an aggression.

Fear of Retaliation: Aggression and Counter-Aggression

If you're going to pick on an opposing player to take out some aggression on it usually makes sense not to target their biggest, toughest, and hard as nails defender known as "The Enforcer" or something of a similarly authoritative nature. Fear of retaliation can inhibit aggression shown towards an opponent out of both fear and respect. Players are often less likely to indulge in un-sports worthy play if they're likely to get exactly the same back in return. Aggression can lead to counter-aggression. Some individuals thrive off this challenge - Others choose to avoid it completely.

Rash Challenge Leads to Aggression the Form of Retaliation



Game Structure in Sports

There have been a number of game related variables which highlight aggression within sports game structure.

Points Differentials

As differences between playing teams scores increases, so does the build-up of frustration that can lead to aggression, when scores have been tied aggression is most often minimally shown between competing teams. Sport's rules for aggressive play (such as the red card in soccer for reckless behaviour) indicate that players and coaches will do their utmost to control frustration and potential aggressive behaviours.

Home or Away

Is home court really an advantage? It has been noted that professional soccer teams have a tendency to show more aggression when playing away. However for Ice Hockey aggression has been shown to have little difference between home and away teams. There are a number of factors affecting home court advantage in sports which are highlighted further down the page.

Participation outcome

As shown in the frustration aggression theory. Losing teams are seen to have significantly heightened aggression levels when compared to their winning opponents.

League position

Generally the lower a team falls in a league standing point the greater the level of aggression shown. Just imagine the aggression levels at Derby County when they achieved the lowest ever points score in a Premiership Football season back in 2007/2008.

Periods of sporting play

In multiple-period play sports it has been shown that incidence of aggressive behaviour increases over the course of the game. Whilst the lowest number of incidents occur in the first period.

Strategies to Reduce Aggression in Sports

If coaches, parents, managers and athletes want to control aggression it is within their power to do so. Unfortunately not all aggression is discouraged. In some environments coaches have been known to applaud aggressive rule breaking behaviour in the belief it increases ticket sales and adds an element of fear to opposing teams who make the visit. Sadly such behaviour at a high level has a tendency to filter down to lower levels and to youth development. Poor behaviour by a sporting icon breeds a culture of aggression.

Controlling and Reducing Athlete Aggression

It is vital for coaches, managers, parents and athletes to consider the following best practices:

- Non-aggressive behaviour models should be reinforced to the athlete.
- Severe penalties should be enforced for aggressive behaviour from coaches, parents, managers and all athletes.
- Positive reinforcements of non-aggressive behaviours should be administered to encourage future behaviours.
- Referees and coaches should be encouraged to attend workshops on aggression management for the implementation of long term best practice.

Controlling and Reducing Spectator Aggression

There are a number of ways rowdy and aggressive behaviour by spectators can be curtailed at sporting events which can be considered.

- Sporting events to be promoted as family occasions.
- The media should not glamorize aggression in sports.
- The media should be held responsible in the case of developing a degree of friction and hatred between teams and opposing fans.
- Spectator aggression must incorporate suitable punishments which reflect the magnitude of the crime.
- The sale of alcohol at events should be limited

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