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Another View

... And sport shouldn't be about who cheats best

By Douglas R. Hochstetler

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I teach a number of courses at Penn State, one of which focuses on sport ethics. My students never need to look far, unfortunately, for examples of unethical acts and attitudes in sport. Take your pick from the following list: Barry Bonds (alleged) and Marion Jones (confessed) connection to steroid use, the Tour de France doping scandals, and New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick and "Spygate."

When these events occur, people respond in a number of ways. Some condemn the incident but continue to support the athlete, coach or team. Others point out a perceived decline in ethical behavior in sport and society. Still more decry the misplaced emphasis on sport and athletics in the first place. The cynics even contend that sport ethics is an oxymoron -- that to compete at high levels requires at minimum a bit of cheating. If one believes sport has at least the possibility of displaying, and even encouraging, ethical behavior, then perhaps we might learn from these recent unethical events.

Following the Patriots' incident, Rex Ryan, defensive coordinator for the Baltimore Ravens said, "I'm not sure sports are supposed to be about who can cheat the best." This is precisely the issue the NFL and other sport organizations need to address. What should competitive sport be about in the first place? What is at the heart of our interscholastic, intercollegiate, and elite athletic programs? Why do we (both fans and participants) value them? Rather than simply bemoaning the fact that these incidents occur, we could view them as the motive for reflection on the nature of sport.

To a large degree, sport involves the contesting of superior skills. In the case of the NFL, we follow these competitions in part to see which teams and individuals display better blocking, tackling, passing, receiving, defending skills, and so forth. Many sports allow both individual athletes and teams to show brilliance when it comes to strategy as well. Football fans appreciate when the defensive coordinator develops a brilliant game plan to stifle the opposition's offense. Likewise, baseball fans value a timely pitching change, double-steal, or defensive substitution.

However, we value superior skills honed in a certain way -- through what political philosopher Michael Sandel terms "giftedness." This means athletic skills cultivated as a result of biological assets in combination with effort and hard work. In short, we respect athletes who display human -- not technologically aided, genetically enhanced or steroid-driven -- capabilities. We want to

see which team has the best athletes and not the best engineers, geneticists or chemists.

At times, athletes and coaches try to gain the upper hand by using methods that skirt the ethical boundaries. In fact, one might say that cheating involves skill, precision, and perhaps even practice. Occasionally, coaches and athletes use actions which could be considered skills -- such as flopping in basketball or taking a dive in soccer. For the Patriots, this technological skill involved a video camera.

Sports are socially-constructed conventions similar to education, government, and the military. We shape athletics to fit our societal expectations, at times with pure motives but on other occasions suspect. Football, baseball, track and field, cycling and other sports can represent the finest qualities of humanity. Conversely, they can deteriorate into humans at their worst.

Sport organizations, from youth leagues to elite levels, need to remain vigilant with regards to their rules as well as the overall moral climate. Ethical decision-making is not easy. Questions such as, "How much performance enhancement should we allow?" is but one example of difficult and ongoing issues faced by sport communities. Thinking more carefully about the purpose of sport puts us in a better position to make these decisions however.

In the end, we all have a collective tendency for moral callousness -- to rationalize our behavior because "everyone else is doing it," or "it's not cheating if I don't get caught." In this sense, the broader culture is not drastically different from the sport world. I hope these unethical sporting acts prompt discussions about the overall value of competition and sports. Perhaps, by clarifying why we value competition in the first place, we can discourage and prevent unethical acts in the future. Then, perhaps, my Penn State students will find it easier to find moral exemplars rather than miscreants in sport.

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