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SPORT COMPETITION AND HEALTH: A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

Key words: sport competition, health, balance, Coubertin Pierre de, martial arts.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss competition and its relation to health in sports. Competition involves the comparison of one's performance to something or somebody else, pushing one to excess, especially when rewards for the performance are expected. On the other hand, health means wholeness and balance. In this text, the topic will first be shown as it was treated in Coubertin's thinking, that is, health is established as a result of competition. Secondly, the relationship of competition and health will be presented as the combination of two excesses – an excess of immobility (as in a sedentary lifestyle) and of movement (as in competitive sport), a situation which prevails at the present time. Last, I shall reject both these views as inappropriate approaches to establish health. As an alternative approach I shall offer the traditional Asian martial arts, which recognize the importance of wholeness and balance as fundamental for the practice of human movement. From their practice then health as balance arises.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking about sport¹ and its relation to health, we often recognize two widely divergent correlations: on the one hand, we believe that sport can promote health, while on the other, we acknowledge that it can also be destructive. Thus, in terms of health, sport has two faces that appear to be at odds. The practice of sport is usually related to a healthy lifestyle in terms of its opposition to the sedentary and inactive lifestyle that prevails today. Sport adds the movement otherwise missing in an almost inactive life. At present, health is often

associated with the physical activity² of human beings [1, 16, 17, 21]. Among the arenas that are presently available as venues for physical activity is competitive sport, in which the activity is even reinforced. However, our belief that sport promotes health is counterbalanced by another one that claims the opposite. This view of sport as being destructive is associated with the abuse of certain aspects of the human being within the practice of sport or possibly with certain dangerous situations that can arise. While the cases of abuse of some aspects of the human being can lead to serious imbalances in the human, dangerous situations can

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¹ In this text, I do not presuppose a narrow definition of sport in which sport and competitive sport are equated [cf. 15], but rather, I assume a broader definition, as is, for example, described in the European Charter of Sport, in which competitive sport is a part of sport.

² Usage of the word “physical” stems from and often also points to a dualistic concept of the human being, which I find problematic and do not wish to endorse. However, I use the word here, as it is often used in the literature on the topic.

lead to injuries. With respect to health understood as wholeness and balance, it will be mainly the former that is discussed in this paper.

In this text, competitive sport here is not to be confused with elite competitive sport, in which health concerns generally become secondary to performance. Elite sport can be considered an extreme form of competitive sport. In fact, it can be said that elite competitive sport is generally considered unhealthy because of its excessive training loads and performance-enhancement practices. However, the focus of this article will be on any sport that has the element of competition in itself, on any level of practice – in physical education classes, in sport for all as well as in elite sport. Sport competition here means any comparison of one's performance to something such as a record or a previous performance or to someone else. The issue discussed here is not only the problem of the excessive levels of training, but rather the fact that competition generally leads to excess instead of to the balanced whole that is associated with health.

COMPETITIVE SPORT AND EXCESS

Competition results from the possibility that sport performances can be compared with something: an opponent or a team, an established record, and/or a personal best. As a result of this comparison, competition produces winners and losers. Without winners and losers, there would be no competition. Competition can be regarded as an enrichment of the testing of our abilities that is inherent in sports, adding to this testing comparison with the opponent(s) or previous records and thus intensifying the human enjoyment of tension, uncertainty and striving. In this, Kretchmar sees the reason why games have regularly been turned from tests into contests [cf. 18: 170-174].

Competition is often discussed as having positive effects. Supporters of competitive sport often stress the important lessons of sport competition such as teaching youth to become good citizens, nurturing a desire to succeed, competing fairly, learning the values of hard work and self-control, becoming courageous and perseverant as well as being gracious winners and good losers etc. [cf. 10; 14: 42; 24]. Competition can also be considered a valuable motivation for participation in sport. The merits of competition were high-

lighted by Pierre de Coubertin [4; 5] in his effort to install sports into education as well as the general life of the citizenry. Also, the twofold challenge of testing one's skills along with testing oneself against an opponent enables competition to be regarded as a reliable way of supporting one's level of performance and level of vigorous activity. This occurs especially when accompanied by rewards, tending to reinforce one's effort. The vision of a highly prized victory, such as gaining respect or recognition, getting a good mark at school and/or a financial reward can often generate a better performance. Two athletes racing stride for stride, breathing down each other's neck, can push themselves to a much higher level of performance than one person just practicing sport alone. In this regard, Coubertin, whose work in the field of sport and physical education heavily influenced the character of modern sport, claimed: "It is absolutely essential for us to measure ourselves against someone or something else. If we have no rivals at our heels, at the very least we should keep a record in front of us, to urge us forward" [4: 162]. However, at the same time, Coubertin rejected excessive competition and recommended instead that one compete against one's own record, as it would lead to an improvement adequate to the individual [4].

Competition is closely related to the well-known Olympic motto: "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (Faster, Higher, Stronger). When competition drives us forward and urges us to go faster, be stronger and leap higher, it leads to excess. This excess is not only found in the training of the body, but is also closely connected to one's way of thinking about wanting to achieve more, to get better, and to overcome oneself. This way of thinking reveals the presupposition that we are imperfect, incomplete and unbalanced beings who need to be improved. And along with this belief is the notion that we need to work hard on our improvement to make our life perfect, whole and balanced. In this way of thinking about ourselves we can find the tendency towards excess, which is somehow incorporated under the ideas of wholeness and balance. This line of thinking is closely connected to our convictions about the need for progress and is also influenced by our living in a competitive society. All this supports the attractiveness of competitive sports over those activities done only for pure enjoyment or for seeking balance.

However, while striving for improvement most of us do not know when to stop. We care more about the way of progress rather than gaining an understanding of what it means to be healthy (that is, to be whole and balanced). Because most of us have never thought about what perfection and completeness mean, we take our notions of these from society. To be healthy we go to doctors whose idea of health is mainly the absence of visible disease. To be perfect we try to achieve things that are considered valuable in society, that is, excellent performance, which then may lead to recognition, respect of others or self-respect, self-assertion, good marks at school, fame, financial security, strength and/or power. However, these are gained not through participation itself, but mainly through the result of it, that is, through triumphs and the rewards they bring.³ Thus, while we may be creatures who thrive on tension and uncertainty to improve, as Kretchmar [18] has remarked with respect to our general liking of competition, it should be stressed here that most of us also tend to cling to certainties and steadiness. And this is what competition can support too. This is not enhanced through participation and pure enjoyment though, but through the comparison of the results of participation – through victories and their consequent rewards. Rewards then, it can be said, vastly influence the actual practice of sport. The first consequence is that we put too much emphasis on attaining victory. This overemphasis on winning is also accompanied by a general disregard for and rejection of those who have lost. The overemphasis on winning can also obscure the “enjoyment of the fray”, which Kretchmar has pointed to as a desirable outcome for those who have not won [18: 173]. This approach also leads to a de-emphasis of the actual process of the performance and the exertion of too much strength when performing while wanting to win. It also encourages various doubtful practices, such as, bending the rules, cheating, hurting others as well as the self, eating disorders, overtraining, treating members of the opposite team as enemies and taking performance-enhancing drugs [cf. 14: 35-36; 24].

All in all, in competitive sport we tend to present our perfection through results, which arise

through comparisons of our abilities with an opponent or in changed time, rather than to nurture our perfection as health / balance. Competition encourages exceeding our present performance by becoming faster and stronger or “soaring” higher. However, how is it possible to unite this excess with balance, when these two appear to be moving in different directions?

COMPETITIVE SPORT: EXCESS AND HEALTH

While competition is associated with excess, throughout Eastern and Western⁴ history health has often been understood as wholeness and balance [3; 19; 22: 102 ff]. However, unlike in the East, excess in the Western tradition has often been tied to health / balance: when we wish for health, we keep striving for it, competing, struggling, and exploiting strength to achieve this aim. Being incomplete and unbalanced we strive for completeness and balance.

Balance, harmony or equilibrium all have the same meaning. Balance means the due measure of parts within a whole. However, different theories presuppose a different whole that is to be balanced. For example, Hippocrates had the view that health is the harmonious blend of four humors [19: 124], while for example the present environmental model of health sees it as the balance of an organism with its environment [19: 131]. If we speak of a balanced whole, it is necessary to include all parts of the whole. On the basis of this understanding a suitable care supporting balance can be chosen. With the most popular definition of the human being nowadays, which encompasses physical, mental and social aspects of the human being, physical education and sport as well as competitive sport are often promoted as a means of caring for the physical part of the human being [1; 16; 21].

The connection between competitive sport and a healthy life is not a new phenomenon. Previously Pierre de Coubertin held that competitive sport can introduce health and harmony into our lives and, with that, into the nations and the whole world [cf. 23]. Coubertin’s followers and

³ That is also why Coubertin insisted on amateurs in Olympic sport, as he knew that material rewards would open a Pandora’s box of problems with the Games [5].

⁴ In this article I shall use the words West / Western when referring to the practices that originated in the Euro-American cultural context, while the terms East / Eastern will be reserved for the East Asian countries which have Buddhism in their tradition.

other supporters of competitive sport did not deviate far from this way of thinking [cf. 2; 13; 14: 38]. First, let us consider the way Coubertin saw the relation of health to excess in competition, as it has been influential to our thinking. Coubertin saw excess and balance in sport both together. Let us have a look at Coubertin's thinking on this subject. In stanza VIII of his *Ode to Sport* Coubertin [8: 630] says:

O Sport, you are Progress!

*To serve you well, man must better himself in body
and in soul.*

*You enjoin him to observe a loftier hygiene;
you require him refrain from all excess.*

*You teach him wise rules
which will give his effort the maximum intensity
without impairing the balance of his health.*

In this paragraph alone we can see excess and health standing side by side. Coubertin speaks of exerting efforts to the maximum intensity without impairing our health. This is not an unusual example of the juxtaposition of excess and balance in Coubertin's work. Though it may seem contradictory, let us have a look at how Coubertin developed this topic and further thought of this relationship. What is then, according to Coubertin, the relation of excess and balance?

Balance, or as Coubertin called it, eurythmy, was not supposed to be established by abiding to the idea of balance, as we might think. Rather, Coubertin thought that we install balance by following the ideas of excess. Thus, for Coubertin health / balance was a result, not an aim. This approach arose from a conviction that the idea of health was not attractive enough for the multitude of young people. Coubertin considered eurythmy to be too utopian as an idea and at the same time too boring, and it was, therefore, an insufficient aim: "I am forced to acknowledge that the individual practice of athletic sports, regularly and perseveringly undertaken for the sake of health, beauty, and harmony, is a chimera. A few individuals may be capable of this, but the rank and file will never be" [5: 543]. This was also the reason why Coubertin rejected the motto "Mens sana in corpore sano": "*Mens sana...* the old saying that pops up in speech when prizes are awarded. But come now! This is hardly human, or at the very least, hardly youthful! It is an ideal for old fossils!" [6: 549]. To deal with this problem, Coubertin offered a

different formulation. He suggested the motto "Mens sana in corpore sano" (Healthy mind in healthy body) be changed to "Mens fervida in corpore lacertoso" (An ardent mind in a trained body). He also began to advocate the ideas of excess, competition, exerting of effort, joyfulness etc., which were much more attractive to youth. However, this did not mean that Coubertin discard the idea of health. For Coubertin, health was a result, not an aim: "The particular condition that it [the motto "Mens sana in corpore sano"] advocates is magnificent, but it is a result, not a goal. If you want to reach a goal, as one educator has said, aim past it. Equilibrium within unavoidable modern commotion can be brought about only through combining or opposing excesses. One will not accomplish *enough* unless one strives for *too much*" [7: 592]. Thus, Coubertin moved away from the traditional idea of the opposition of balance and excess to that of excess leading to balance and health. That is why Coubertin continued to advocate competition as a necessary means for self-development [4], even though it resulted in many problems within Olympism. One of the ways Coubertin sought to protect Olympism from excessive competition was to insist that the athletes remained amateur.

This way of thinking is one way to understand the relationship of harmony and excess. However, I do not present this example here to offer a criticism of Coubertin, but to show the contradiction often present in Western thinking. In the West, we often think that we can obtain health and balance through striving, progress and exploiting effort. Generally speaking, it can be said that our everyday living takes place in the excess of an inactive and sedentary lifestyle. Sitting in our offices on weekdays has considerably reduced our everyday movement and this puts us into dysbalance. Sport is supposed to improve the situation by adding strenuous movements to our lives and thus keeping us "balanced". As a result of this addition of excessive movement to our lives in the form of competitive sport, we live with two excesses: an excess in our lack of movement (sedentary lifestyle) and an excess of movement (competitive sport). Competition makes us move more intensively and like this we think that our lack of movement in our everyday life can be "balanced". As has been shown, some people continue to think that the marriage of these two excesses will result in establishing health.

However, as we regularly see in the case of “weekend warriors”, that is, people who attempt to compensate for a week of inactivity with a couple of days of hyperactivity, to counter one extreme with the other is not necessarily a prescription for health.

THE QUESTION OF HEALTH

If we reject the idea of promoting health through combining excesses, then we need to find another way to health – we need to change our perspective on the whole topic. The problem lies in the way of thinking that says: If we wish for health, we must keep striving and struggling for it. In other words, it assumes that we think we are incomplete and that we need to gain completeness. And herein lies the main problem: while holding onto the idea of being incomplete, imperfect and unbalanced, it is difficult to gain completeness, perfection and balance. Therefore, it is necessary to overcome this way of thinking and to carefully reconsider the problematic of balance. Here, we can take an example from Eastern thinking for a more adequate way to find balance. In this model, the relation of the idea of wholeness and balance to that of excess and effort in movement practices is taken much more seriously than in the West. For this purpose, the traditional Japanese martial arts seem to be a suitable example, as they resemble sport but function differently while establishing balance.

Though the practice of the traditional Japanese martial arts may look similar to sport practice, there is a marked difference: they reject the spirit of competition [9]. Thus, there have also been some martial arts teachers who have rejected the inclusion of their martial art among the Olympic sports as they are worried that competition with its overemphasis on results could undermine the spirit of their martial art [12]. In what way then is the traditional practice of the martial arts so different from sport practice? During the training of the traditional martial arts, the aim of the practice (e.g. hitting a target) recedes to the background. As there is no need to achieve records, there is no possibility to compare them. Rather, the most important matter is the way the human being is [11]. This cannot be achieved through comparing and measuring oneself with others, or previous records, but only through balancing the whole human being together with the activity at hand.

Thus, the traditional martial arts highlight the actual process and the quality of the movement. The idea of balancing, however, is not to strive and expend energy to achieve balance as if it were something that can be obtained. Rather, the idea is to relax what is tense and that which hinders the performance. In this way, the trainee becomes flexible and his or her movement begins to flow. In comparison to the martial arts, the athlete in a competition is driven to perform at his or her best and is expected to “give 110%” in order to do so. The practitioner of the martial arts does not strive for any goal, but through endless repeating of movements is becoming complete and balanced. It is not seeking for balance though, as the practitioner understands the need to let go of the idea that more effort is required for “success.” In this point, martial arts practice influences human thinking. Thinking is very important in this context, as it is thinking that imposes aims onto the training. Here, it is essential to give up thinking and thus any idea of reaching some aims, which would presuppose an exertion of effort [19]. In this way, the practitioner becomes quiet and open to what is happening around him or her. Any performance then comes from within and from this balance and openness.

Through the practice of the martial arts, the whole human being gradually becomes balanced and united, through the endless, some might say mind-numbing, repetition of movements that quiet the thought processes and promote awareness. The training can last for many years. This balancing in the practitioner includes all aspects of the human being. Balancing is a much longer way to performing well than trying to achieve good results through strength and effort. However, eventually the results of a balanced performance are more powerful and effective than those obtained through mere strength. There are a number of Zen stories about martial arts adepts whose feats are extraordinary. The feats are extraordinary because they are not meant to be anything and thus are not constrained by the limits imposed by thinking and practice. The martial arts practitioner only needs to be balanced and then any performance happens in the best possible way. Being balanced is not just a matter of the individual in question, but of all the interactions within the given situation.

What about our key topic, that is, health and the martial arts? In the martial arts, it is not necessary to speak of health. Health is a result of the training rather than being an aim of it. Still, this

result is quite different from that described in Coubertin's thinking. The training of the traditional martial arts is itself balancing, and while forgetting about any aim in the course of practice, the whole human being gradually becomes balanced [20]. When we say that health is balance, the practitioners of the martial arts become healthy. But in fact, health / balance is not an aim for them. If our thinking held onto the desired state of health as an aim, it would become problematic. We would begin pursuing the idea of health as the ideal way of being [15: 97], instead of realizing that we do not need to pursue goals, in order to be complete and balanced. Health understood as a balance cannot be realized when we keep seeking it. Rather, without thinking of seeking it, one gets balanced through the balancing practice. Health then means a balanced, flexible human being in the world because a human being is not a whole as such, but rather, a part of a larger whole.

CONCLUSION

Health that is understood as balance and wholeness differs from excess, and to wish to obtain health through the practice of excess is highly questionable. However, my aim in this article was not to say that competition that promotes excess has no value to us. Competition has its own merits that cannot be found elsewhere. Rather the aim of the article was to highlight the problem of uniting health, which is understood as balance, with excess as it prevails in competitive sport. Further, it sought to reject the idea that competition in sport is a means to health. Movement can promote health, but our view needs to be focused on the quality of movement and its balance rather than on the results. And if competition is to be used as a part of health programs, its limits need to be properly understood.

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