Opponents or Enemies: Rethinking the Nature of Competition

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I would like to begin this morning with a quote (cited in Sperber, 1998, p. 97):

I’m convinced that the physical education directors want to get rid of coaches in all sports, build themselves up and have their programs accepted by all. What good is it to have muscles developed if a boy loses the desire for competition. When I take part in a sport, I want to win and kick the brains out of the other fellow. I’m not content to play with someone. I want to play against them.

The quote is from Lou Little who, in 1943 when he spoke these words, was the Columbia University football coach. He was arguing in favor of competitive sport as opposed to recreational physical education programs. His argument hinged on the added value that competition brings to physical activity.

At the Mendelson Center for Sport, Character & Culture, we, too, believe that promoting competition is important. In fact, we see it as an effective way to promote good character. Promoting competition is one of our key themes. In light of this quote, the idea that competition is a good vehicle for promoting human development, and especially character development, may strike some of you as odd. It may even strike a few of you as downright heretical — perhaps especially those of you who have also read Alfie Kohn’s (1992) provocative and thoughtful book, No Contest: The Case Against Competition.

In that book, Kohn basically shares Lou Little’s understanding of competition, but he comes to the opposite conclusion about its worth. For Kohn, all competition is inherently bad. And competition is bad, Kohn argues, for a number of distinct reasons. It is bad from an instrumental standpoint because it really doesn’t, contrary to popular belief, lead to improved performance or production. He cites numerous studies which all seem to suggest that competition undermines both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of performance. Just one quick example. The psychologist, Amabile (1982) had a group of 7-11 year-old girls make collages. Some of the girls, those in the competitive condition, were competing for prizes. Other girls were just making them for fun. Ambile then had professional artists evaluate the works. What the artists found was that the girls who were competing made collages that were less creative, less spontaneous, and less complex and varied than the ones made by the girls who were not competing.

Competition, Kohn also argues, is bad from a psychological standpoint. Competition leads to heightened anxiety and lowered self-esteem. It leads to dependence on external

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evaluation, and performance-based standards of personal worth. It can also lead to devastating feelings of humiliation and shame.

But, most importantly, Kohn argues that competition is bad from a moral standpoint. In short, the argument is that competition make one person's happiness dependent on another's sorry; it trains people to take delight in other's pain. In Kohn's view, the step from "wanting to win" to "wanting to kick the brains out of the other fellow" is short and inevitable. Let me quote briefly from the book. Kohn writes:

*Strip away all the claims in its behalf that we accept and repeat reflexively. What you have left is the essence of the concept: mutually exclusive goal attainment (MEGA). One person succeeds only if another does not. From this uncluttered perspective, it seems clear right away that something is drastically wrong with such an arrangement. ...Competition by its very nature damages relationship. Its nature, remember, is mutually exclusive goal attainment, which means that competitors' interests are inherently opposed. I succeed if you fail, and vice versa. ...so the failure of others is devoutly to be wished.*

According to Kohn, competition inherently sets up antagonisms between people and trains us to think that our own interests and well-being can be served only at the expense of others. Personally, I am convinced that Kohn's analysis, which of course is far more nuanced and complex than I have presented here, is essentially correct. If you examine what is happening in our sport arenas, on our playing fields, in our pools, and on our tracks — as well as in our classrooms, boardrooms, and political spheres — I think you will be able to find and document just the kind of negative effects that Kohn so aptly describes. But, and here's the catch, I don't think he's talking about competition! Rather, he's talking about what I would like to call "de-competition."

Part of the problem, in my view, is that we have a very inadequate language when it comes to competition. In this connection, I also think it is worth noting that virtually every social change movement is accompanied by a change in language. As the civil rights movement gained steam, the word negro was replaced by 'black' and later 'African-American.' As the women's movement spread, many began to adopt the title of 'Ms.' to avoid the connotations associated with Miss or Mrs. Our vocabulary reflects our consciousness and also helps shape our ways of thinking.

I think we need a new word that will not replace the word "competition," but will name what is really its polar opposite. Let us keep in mind that the word competition comes from the Latin -petere, meaning "to strive," combined with the prefix, com-, meaning "with." So the root meaning of competition is "to strive with." It is not "to strive against," but "to strive with." When you strive with someone, you bring out the best in each other through presenting a worthy challenge. But this process of competition, of striving with another, is really a fairly delicate process that balances seriousness with play, intrinsic motivations with extrinsic motivations, product orientation with process orientation. When the delicate balance required for true competition is upset, competition can all too easily dissolve or decompose or degenerate into decompetition.
Much as sociologists have employed the German words *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to define "ideal types" of human association that are nowhere present in actual, historical reality in their pure form, so competition and decompetition refer to ideal types (not ideal in the moral sense, but in the sense of abstract notions). No actual sport event will be a perfect expression of competition, nor a perfect expression of decompetition. Real life, real contests, will present some mix or blending of these. Still, identifying these two distinct ideal types gives us a conceptual tool to examine the dynamics of contrasting social processes.

Let me briefly outline more specifically what each of these words point to. In short, competition and decompetition involve contrasting views of opponents, officials, the rules, the goal, and the process. About the only thing that competition and decompetition share in common is the external, structural arrangement of mutually exclusive goal attainment. But the real meaning and attributes of that structural arrangement are quite different for the two. Thus, competition and decompetition are defined with reference to the subjective orientation of the participants, though I might add that this subjective orientation or stance quickly leads to readily observable differences in how the participants play the game.

Let me offer a parallel illustration from another realm of human activity. Suppose we see two people facing each other, alternately talking. We might suppose what is happening is communication, a sharing of ideas or feelings. But, in fact, the same outward structure - people talking in alternating patterns - may or may not be communication. If there is no intent to share, if there is no intent to be receptive, then we may have, instead, simply alternating monologues, or we may have rhetorical flourishes without any real communication, or we may have a number of other things. In the field of communications, we have labels for activities that may look like communication, but, in fact, are not. For example, if we say something is "propaganda" we know that it is not a genuine effort to share information, but instead is an effort at manipulation designed to look like communication. In the area of competition, we don't have such a rich vocabulary. We need to expand our vocabulary so that we can name activities that may look like competition, but, in fact, are not.

At the most general level, competition and decompetition differ in relation to the basic metaphor that guides them. *Competition* reflects a metaphor of partnership. By this metaphor, each competitor is viewed as an enabler (in the positive sense) for the other; each requires the other to bring out the best in each. There is a synergy that results from the mutual challenge that each competitor provides to the other; this synergy enables each competitor to reach new heights of excellence and mastery that could not be achieved in isolation. Because achieving my own best performance is contingent on the availability of a worthy challenge, I hope that my competitor is performing at her or his best. Viewed in this light, competition is really a subset of cooperation.

The basic metaphor for decompetition is a battle or war. Decompetitors view the other through the lens of rivalry, and rather than hope that they perform at their best, I hope that they trip up. For decompetitors, opponents are obstacles to be overcome, enemies to be conquered. Decompetition, not competition, is the opposite of cooperation.

Competition is multidimensional in scope. Its desired goals including the development and display of mastery and excellence, together with the experience of that host of emotions that come with strenuous play, emotions such as joy, exhilaration, excitement, and hope. In contrast,
decompetition is rather flat and unidimensional with the desired goal being winning through domination. The hoped for emotional element is simply the thrill that comes with conquest.

Competition and decompetition also promote fundamentally different views of winning. Within competition, winning and losing are required because the outcome enables the process. Winning is significant because it allows striving to win. The primary focus is on the process, on the striving, but that process would not be possible without the structural set-up of mutually exclusive goal attainment. For [decompetition], the outcome becomes separated from the process and draws all significance to itself. In decompetition, the outcome or end cannibalizes the process or means.

For competitors, then, winning and losing are acceptable because they enable a worthwhile process to take place. For decompetitors, the process is acceptable, the playing of the game is tolerable, because it allows for the reward of winning and the spoils that too often go with it. For competitors, one cannot win without winning fairly; for decompetitors, the concluding scoreboard is the only arbiter of winning.

As implied by the last comments, competition and decompetition entail fundamentally different views of the process. For competitors, the ideal process contains drama and uncertainty. There is mystery and tension involved; but it is not the tension of antagonists so much as the tension of the unknown. How will things turn out in the end? The ideal competition involves story and plot and turns of event. In contrast, certainty is desired by those engaged in decompetition. Putting the game away early is ideal, and running up the score is okay, because they guarantee victory which is the only true value motivating decompetition.

Finally, competition and decompetition involve different views of rules, the nature of sportsmanship, and the role of officials. Competitors are fundamentally guided in their actions by the ideals of fairness and noninjurious play. Rules are viewed as imperfect but essential expressions of these norms. Thus, upholding the rules is viewed as the minimal demand of good sport behavior. Upholding the ideals of fairness, noninjurious play, and the spirit of competition (as opposed to decompetition) – even when not required by the rules – is the core of sportsmanship. Officials are viewed as personal agents who share an important role in the process of competition by seeking to ensure equality of opportunity and treatment.

For decompetitors, rules are partially tolerated restraints, and circumvention of rules is to be expected when detection is unlikely. Thus, rather than rules providing the minimal floor for sportsmanship, they provide its maximal ceiling. Rule adherence is probably the very most we can expect of the decompetitor, and even rule obedience cannot be expected if there are widely shared informal norms allowing for rule deviation. Within decompetition, officials are tolerated because even the decompetitor recognizes that the adversary, the opponent, needs to be restrained! While the officials are there to enable or facilitate the game for the competitor, in an odd sort of way the officials become indistinguishable from the game for the decompetitor; outwitting the officials is just one more game strategy. Officials are part of the opposition.

Having sketched out some of the differences between competition and decompetition, I would like to turn now to some of our empirical research and use it as a way to further develop these ideas. The focus of the research that Brenda and I have conducted over the past twenty years has been on moral reasoning and development as they relate to sport (e.g., Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). In some of our early research, we were disturbed to find that participants in
some sports were, on average, less mature in their moral reasoning than their non-sport-involved peers (Bredemeier et al., 1986; Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). This got us to wondering more about how moral issues are thought about in the context of sport.

Here, I need to present a brief aside. The way moral reasoning maturity is typically assessed is by presenting people with short stories that depict situations in which actors need to make a decision that has moral implications. The situation, for example, may revolve around a choice between honesty and hurting someone’s feelings; or maybe, more dramatically, the actor may be in a situation in which theft is the only way to preserve someone’s life. We then ask the person to tell us what they think the protagonist should do. What is important, from a developmental standpoint, is not so much what they say an actor should do, but the reasons why. What are the considerations that they think are important? How do they balance the different moral issues involved? Why does one moral value take priority over another, and so on. Then, through an analysis of the underlying system or structure of reasoning, a distinct moral logic can be extracted and identified. We call that moral logic a moral stage or level. And though researchers differ in the nuances of their interpretations, there is general agreement that as children develop, they pass through a regular age-related sequence of stages on their way toward moral reasoning maturity (e.g., Gibbs et al., 1992; Haan et al., 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999). Early on, children use a moral logic that tends to be rather egocentric, with one’s own interests being given more weight than those of others. Later, children or adolescents tend to think in terms of the group, and what one’s reference group, community, or society in general expects. Finally, with maturity, one approaches moral issues in terms of fundamental principles or values.

Since our special interest was in how people think about moral issues in sport, we designed two sets of moral dilemmas. One set paralleled the standard stories typically used in this type of research. These dilemmas were set in everyday life and presented choices in which the protagonist needed to choose one moral value or another. In addition, we designed a set of dilemmas that placed the moral issues in a sport context. We were interested in finding out whether people would use the same pattern of reasoning about moral issues in a sport context as they did when the moral issues were placed in everyday life.

In short, we found that they did not. When people reasoned about the moral dilemmas set within a sport context they tended to use a pattern of moral reasoning, a stage of moral reasoning, that was lower on the developmental continuum than when the same people reasoned about similar issues in everyday life. In short, their reasoning became more egocentric. As a result of these and similar findings, we developed a theory of what we call “game reasoning.” One leg of the theory is the empirical results just mentioned.

Another leg of the theory is an interesting body of philosophical and social science literature on play, games, and sports. In this literature, it is commonplace to discuss these activities as somehow “set apart” from everyday life. The noted philosopher Huizinga (1955), for example, described play as “a stepping out of ‘real life’ into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (p. 8). Handelman (1977), an anthropologist, wrote that entry into the play realm requires “a radical transformation in cognition and perception” (p. 186). Schmitz (1976), a sociologist, similarly suggested that play transfers participants into a world with new forms of space, time, and behavior, “delivering its own values in and for itself” (p. 26).
Anthropologists, such as Firth (1973), have documented rituals and conventions that serve to mark off the spacial and temporal boundaries of play and sport; and these rituals and conventions not only designate special space and time, they symbolically function to redefine people as players and then reconstitute players back into people at the game’s conclusion.

Our theory holds that movement into the world of sport involves not only the kind of cognitive and affective adjustments that these social scientists have highlighted, but that it also typically involves changes in moral perception and reasoning, and that is why we find people scoring lower on moral judgment tests when the dilemmas are set in sport contexts.

The theory is also congruent with informal observation. Sport commentators often contrast the on-field behavior of athletes to their off-field behavior. A tennis player, for example, may be described as mean and nasty on the court, but gentle and kind in everyday life. Moreover, athletes themselves often make this same distinction. For example, former heavyweight boxing champion, Larry Holmes, once said in a 60 Minutes interview that before he enters the ring, “I have to change, I have to leave the goodness out and bring all the bad in, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

Holmes comments were echoed in a number of interviews that we conducted. In many of these interviews, athletes suggested that you have to be bad to be good in sport. For example, in an interview that we conducted with Ron Rivera, who played with the Chicago Bears, he described a similar transformation. In talking about his everyday personality, he described himself as typically soft-spoken, considerate, and friendly. But when asked to describe the on-field Ron, he replied, “He’s totally opposite from me...He’s a madman...No matter what happens, he hits people. He’s a guy with no regard for the human body.”

I find that quote fascinating. Rivera begins by asserting a radical dualistic view of his own persona, objectifying and distancing the “athletic self” from what he perceives to be his real self. Speaking of the athletic self, Rivera said: “He’s totally opposite from me...He’s a madman...” This sounds very much like the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of Larry Holmes.

I suspect that many of you may question the moral legitimacy of the reasoning transformations implied in these quotes. But my point right now is that it is a common experience in the world of sport to alter the way one typically thinks and feels about moral issues. Perhaps Holmes and Rivera represent somewhat extreme cases, though I don’t think they are all that atypical. The reality is that many actions that may be seen as totally illegitimate in everyday life—such as inflicting pain on another human being—may be accepted and even embraced as a routine part of some sports.

To better understand this change from life to sport, we conducted a qualitative study in which we asked athletes specifically about the differences between their thinking about moral issues in sport and in other areas of their life. In these interviews, we focused specifically on the issue of aggression because of its clear moral implications, and we interviewed athletes immediately following a game so as to maximize the likelihood of tapping the forms of reasoning actually used during competition.

What we found is that many athletes, certainly not all, saw sport as a time of letting go of everyday life concerns, including, at least to a limited extent, moral concerns. They wanted to throw themselves into the sport experience, thinking only about their own interest, and perhaps that of their team. This fits the description of sport provided by the sociologist, Ennis (1976),
who describes sport as an "institution of release." It is a sphere of activity that is not only "set aside" spatially and temporally from everyday life, it "sets aside" or releases the concerns of everyday life. Indeed, part of the appeal of sport is its relative freedom from daily concerns. This "moral release" theme recurred in many of our interviews. For example, one athlete put it quite succinctly when he said (quoted in Bredemeier & Shields, 1985):

*In sports you can do what you want. In life it's more restricted. The pressure is different in sports and life. It's harder to make decisions in life because there are so many people to think about, different people to worry about. In sports you're free to think about yourself.*

For this athlete, and for many others that we interviewed, sport released them from the everyday obligation to think of others, to give them the same kind of moral consideration that would be appropriate at other times.

There are a number of special conditions present in sport that help create this sphere of freedom and release. Sport is a very unique context that has a number of atypical features that jointly function to create its "set aside" character. First, sport action is oriented toward an artificial, scarce goal, namely winning. Second, both the goal (winning) and the actions allowed (such as dribbling in basketball or soccer) have no particular value or meaning apart from the sport context. Sport is tethered to play, and, in itself, is nonserious and nonconsequential. Third, the game relevant interests of the participants are, by definition, in zero-sum opposition. If one party obtains the goal, by necessity the other party or parties do not. Fourth, and this is critical, the actions that comprise sport are rule-governed and those rules have been carefully designed to both equalize opportunity and minimize risk. One could say, perhaps, that they are based on the moral concepts of justice and care! Finally, at least in formal, organized sport, action is continually and externally monitored to insure a reasonable level of conformity to the equalizing and protective rule structure.

All of these features of sport, working together, allow the sport participant to focus narrowly on performance and largely set aside other concerns. Narrow self-focus, or egocentrism, is allowed because the goal has no intrinsic value. It is allowed because the moral issues of fairness and protection are already presupposed. It is allowed because moral authority is, by design, externalized and placed in the hands of coaches and officials.

Of course, moral issues do arise in sport and they actually arise quite frequently. Whether one chooses to use pain as a tactical strategy, and to what degree, is a moral decision. How strictly one wants to interpret the rules is a moral decision; when and how much to use techniques of psychological distraction on opponents is a moral decision, and so on. Often, such moral issues are subtly negotiated among the players in virtually every game.

We have called the form of moral exchange that occurs in sport, "bracketed morality" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986a, 1986b; Shields & Bredemeier, 1984, 1995). It is morality that in some important ways is "bracketed" or set-off from everyday life. At its best, "bracketed morality" is simply a playful deviation from everyday life with no real world consequences. In a very real sense, people "play" at egocentrism. In such cases, we view it as entirely appropriate and legitimate, even though it resembles less mature forms of moral reasoning.
We used the term bracketed to connote two points. First, as I have been suggesting, the moral exchange that occurs in sport is different from that of daily life. Most of the time, morality requires that we pay attention to the need to equalize the obligations and benefits associated with our various relationships. Sport, on the other hand, is characterized by a greater degree of personal freedom, and a lessening of such relational responsibility. Focus on self-interest, or collective self-interest by which I mean team-interest, is not only allowed in sport, it is presupposed. As a consequence, egocentric moral thinking characterizes much of the moral exchange in sport. Because of the unique features of sport, this egocentrism is viewed as legitimate by all parties involved (or at least nearly all) and by most observers.

But not all action supportive of self-interest is morally appropriate, even in sport. Sport may allow for a greater degree of freedom, but it is not pure moral anarchy. That is the second point. The term bracketed still connotes connection. Bracketed morality is a form of moral action that is nested within a broader, more encompassing morality. It is set apart by its relative leniency, yet it remains connected to basic moral presuppositions. It is a playful deviation, not a serious detachment.

The critical and philosophical question is just how free is a person to neglect standard moral concerns while playing sport. Just how lenient and elastic is this morality? I am not going to attempt a complete answer to that question, but would like to offer one observation. The egocentrism of bracketed morality, the focus on self-interest, the relative moral freedom of sport, presupposes – depends upon for its legitimacy – the special conditions of sport, conditions that are designed to guarantee initial conditions of fairness, on-going safeguards of equal opportunity, and reasonable protections of physical well-being. When the freedom associated with bracketed morality is used to undermine these conditions, bracketed morality ceases to be a nonserious and playful deviation from the morality of everyday life and loses its legitimacy.

And in the context of sport, this happens all too frequently. Since sport is known for its penchant for short aphorisms and cliches, let me adapt one here: If you give sport participants a moral inch, they’ll take a mile! Whether we’re talking about blatant cheating, aggression, or verbal abuse, we all know the stories. Now, lest I be misunderstood, let me quickly add that I don’t think athletes are some breed apart from the rest of us. Something else must be going on here. Briefly, what I think is going on is that contemporary sport is rarely just sport. It is business. It is politics. It is entertainment. And so on. As a result, sport participants experience sport less as play than as an opportunity to pursue goals with real world consequences.

At its core, sport is an odd blending of play and work, of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, of “it’s just a game,” and, “life’s a game.” Under these conflicting tensions and pulls, is it really surprising that a moral leniency that is legitimated, in part, by the playful, nonserious nature of sport is stretched beyond its appropriate bounds? One can hide seriousness under the cloak of play. The egocentrism of “the game” provides an easy rationalization of all manner of egocentric moral distortion.

How, then, do we encourage, or at least allow, an appropriate “letting go” of everyday morality without simultaneously inviting moral corruption? There is clearly no single or easy answer to this question, but I would suggest that one approach is to clearly differentiate competition from decompetition. Competition can embrace moral freedom as a playful deviation from everyday life, but as competition degenerates into decompetition, that same freedom
degenerates into license. The real question, then, is how can we learn to handle freedom? This is a fundamental question that is at the heart of what Brenda talked about yesterday – education for democratic citizenship.

If we are going to handle freedom in sport or in other competitive contexts, we need to learn to distinguish between competition and decompetition, and the moral issues that arise when the shift from the former to the latter occurs. Within decompetition, opponents are viewed as enemies or objects, neither of which hold moral rights equivalent to the self. Within decompetition, officials are there to be manipulated and influenced, rather than to serve as protectors of the conditions that allow for the moral freedom that characterizes genuine competition. Within decompetition, rules are inconveniences to be observed when necessary, rather than essential frameworks that make the unique space and time and practice of sport possible and desirable.

The final question I would like to address, and I can do so only briefly, is how do we sustain competition? How do we encourage competition and discourage decompetition? I think to do so, we need to avoid two opposite tendencies. First, I think we need to avoid thinking of the problem in solely or even primarily individual terms. Too often, I think we try to isolate the problem in terms of individual athletes or coaches. If only we could fix the athletes or coaches – make them better people – we would be OK. A variant is the “fix the kids” approach. If only we could teach children proper values, we would be OK. I think that the individual approach fails to recognize how thoroughly social we all are; how we are formed in and through community, and how we take on the values and perspectives that are ingrained within our collective myths, rituals, symbols and organized patterns of behavior. We are not going to get very far if our efforts are limited to trying to make change one person at a time.

The other approach that I think we need to avoid is that of seeking to change the culture, as if we had sufficient power to alter the deeply-rooted collective yearnings, images, and goals of our society. You can’t stop a stampeding elephant with a fly-swatter, and we are not going to change the culture of sports by asking people to sign codes of conduct, making public service announcements, or plastering posters on locker room walls. I think we need to recognize how deeply counter-cultural the effort to restore competition really is. As a counter-cultural effort, we need to employ tools appropriate to counter-cultural movements.

I think the best approach is neither to focus on changing individuals nor society – at least not as our starting point. Rather, we need to try to make change team by team, community by community, league by league. We need to build within our sport teams and local communities a sufficient depth of understanding of what we are talking about that they can start to embody within their own patterns of behavior the true norms of competition. Within sport teams, this will require that we build a genuine sense of community and shared life so that the collective norms of the group can take on real significance for each member.

At the Mendelson Center for Sport, Character & Culture, one of our primary goals is to design sport programs that can foster positive character development. In this task, we share a goal for sport involvement with millions of parents who believe, perhaps naively, that their children’s participation in sport programs is a good thing. “Sport builds character,” is the cultural adage. As researchers, we believe that sport does no such thing. At least not automatically. If sport is to be of any positive benefit, from a character standpoint, then
deliberate effort and planning need to occur. And that effort and planning needs to be informed by an understanding of the real moral dynamics that characterize sport experience. We believe that clarifying the nature of competition, and distinguishing it from decompetition, is one dimension of this effort. If we can make sport truly competitive, it can build character. And, simultaneously, it takes character to make sport truly competitive.

So, yes, we want to encourage competition. We want to encourage competition for the sake of sport, and for the sake of those who participate in sport. But we fundamentally need the concept of decompetition to clarify our meaning. We hope you will embrace this “two letter intervention” and start in your own work to talk of competition and decompetition, of competitors and decompetitors. We hope this new language will help to open hearts and minds to just what is at stake, to what is being lost in our culture as competition surrenders to decompetition, and we hope it will provide a means for us all, working together, to reclaim that important space in which we can strive with one another in seriousness, but also in joy. Thank you.
References


