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# Taming the Dark Side

## *Human Aggression Ameliorated Through Sports*

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Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychiatry, wasn't Greek, but he would have agreed with the Greek notion of life as an *agona* (a struggle, fight or contest). While ancient Greeks might have been referring to the frequent warfare between their various city-states, the Olympic Games (*Agones*) or some other form of external competition, Freud was referring to an internal *agona*: the ongoing conflict between the rational and irrational parts of the human personality.

According to Freud, human beings have a "dark side" full of powerful, primitive sexual and aggressive drives which, if allowed full expression, would spell the end of civilization. If everyone was promiscuous and felt free to attack others whenever or

however they pleased, the resulting chaos would eventually destroy family stability, community bonds, science, art, law, religion and everything else associated with civilized society. For civilization to survive, Freud warned, human aggression had to be tamed.

### AN OUTLET FOR AGGRESSION

Sports, he felt, were an excellent outlet for physical and verbal aggression. Sports permit the release of aggressive energy, but within a set of rules or customs. Although sports vary in their degree of combativeness (for example, boxing is more combative than swimming), no sport permits the deliberate killing or maiming of one's opponent. Furthermore, team sports require that individuals subdue their selfish concerns and work together toward a common goal. While the goal might be defeating another team, athletes must suppress their dark side's desire to dominate and outdo others within their own team, and consider what's good for the team, not themselves.

Yet team sports also provide an outlet for the individual competitive spirit. Athletes, in striving to improve their performance, are constantly

competing against themselves. This form of competition harms no one and contributes not only to team performance, but to personal satisfaction and recognition.

Sports require commitment, discipline and rigorous self-care in terms of nutrition, sleep and exercise, all of which help put the brakes on another aspect of our dark side—aggression toward the self or self-destructiveness, which Freud called the "death instinct."

In his book, *Authentic Happiness*, noted psychologist Martin Seligman presents decades of research indicating that after basic physical needs are met, true happiness, as opposed to the temporary gratifications involved in sensual pleasure and enjoyable pastimes, lies in developing positive strengths and applying them toward worthy goals. "But the golden age Athenians," Seligman writes, "like Aristotle" who defined happiness (*eudemonia*) as the exercise of excellence or desirable traits, "already knew this," as did "Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu ... the authors of the Old and New Testament." What they and other philosophers and spiritual giants called "virtues," modern mental health professionals label "positive strengths."

The universally recognized and time-honored virtues of wisdom and knowledge, courage, justice, emotional control and loyalty to a purpose higher than one's self can all be exercised in sports. Indeed, sustained success requires not only physical muscle but emotional and mental muscle. Today an increasing number of athletes are turning to sports psychology to help them develop the emotional and mental stamina embodied in these six virtues (as applied to sports).

For example, sports researchers have found that athletes can better their individual and team performance by improving their ability to learn new skills, assess opponents and make decisions under pressure (wisdom and knowledge); cope with competition anxiety and fear of injury (courage); overcome distractions and performance and motivational slumps (emotional control); abide by the rules of the game (justice); and adhere to personal and team goals (loyalty to a higher purpose). The techniques used include motivational exercises, goal setting, yoga, positive self-talk

and various forms of mind control. Especially popular are visualization, imagery and brain exercises, which enhance physical coordination, skills and overall performance. Essentially, practicing maneuvers mentally can actually improve performance.

Like the samurai of old, modern athletes are learning breathing techniques and meditation to calm themselves. Just as Spartan warriors were trained in music and dance to improve group cohesion and maneuverability, some modern approaches employ music to improve motor skills and self-confidence. Similarly, feudal samurai performed sword and fan dances to bolster their courage and practice physical and mental control. Samurai were also expected to master a musical instrument, learn Chinese characters and recite (and even sing) poems to practice channeling energy toward a specific goal. Samurai rock gardens, tea ceremonies and other rituals served similar purposes. Some current sports techniques also use ritual.

For some fans, sports are a light

**"Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work ... a civilization work."**

**—Vince Lombardi**

diversion or a temporary escape from daily routine. Others, however, identify so closely with a particular team that their self-esteem and mood have been found to rise and fall with their team's victories and losses. In some homes, the Super Bowl and other major championship events are treated like a patriotic or religious holiday and become a family tradition.

Sports can also serve as a valuable emotional outlet. During events fans may scream, shout, jump for joy, curse, criticize and express feelings with an intensity that might be socially or personally unacceptable in their regular life. ☺