



PAIN AND SUFFERING IN SPORT

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IVO JIRÁSEK^{1*}, EMANUEL HURYCH²

¹ Faculty of Physical Culture, Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic

² College of Polytechnics, Jihlava, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Pain is an authentic part of humanity. This text deals with the topic of pain within the context of sports. It compares the agon of war to the agon of sports. Here, pain is considered as a physical phenomenon, as a cultural and social construct as well as a meaningful phenomenon. Another issue addressed in this paper is how pain is presented as an authentic component of performing sports. A loss of authenticity in sports is mentioned in connection with the prevalence of injuries. Special attention is paid to the topic of death, which is understood as being a part of the horizon of pain. The last part of the article focuses on crises in professional sports and asks about the meaning of pain and suffering in sports.

Key words: pain, suffering, agon, authenticity, death

What is sports?

Is it really composed of every intentional form of movement activity? This is the most common usage of this term. We can recollect a discussion within *Journal of the Philosophy of Sports* about the triangle of sports – game – play and how the relationship between these notions was searched for in terms of different hierarchy and meanings. Of course, such an answer could not have been definitely explained. We instead argue from a different point of view, where sports are a part of movement culture [1]. This social-cultural subsystem includes, besides sports education, movement recreation, movement therapy and movement art. Tangible movement activity, such as lifting one's knee, belongs to a different subsystem according to the definition of this activity. Therefore, the logic of movement education is in the development of personality. The rejuvenative and relaxing aspects of movement places it as a part of movement recreation. The valuation of health plays a key role in movement therapy while the value of beauty is the main feature in movement art. What is the situation with sports? From this point of view sports has two basic components: one being the push for maximum achievement and the other of the struggle for victory in strictly organized competitive conditions.

Agon – a transcultural component of society

The process of challenge, interpersonal rivalry, and the endeavor to achieve victory is clearly recognized in any society. This can be seen in any feudal society

of medieval Europe, in the samurais of Japan or in the Native-Americans of North America. Furthermore, the individual endeavor to become exceptional, perfect, personally honored or superior is reached by accepting higher levels of hazardous competition and is seen in every society. This common social principle is known as an “agon motive” [2]. Agon is the ancient Greek word expressing competition, encounter, and contest. Ancient Greeks had another name for struggle, “polemos”, which is understood as competition being a form of war. Within such a context it is possible to find some common as well as singular features concerning sports and war [3]. Hence, there are parallels between sports and war; sports can be considered as “a secondary war”, a symbol of real agon. Naturally, it is not surprising that the original martial agon was transformed into sports agon. Full agon is fixated not just by the goal to beat a rival but in killing one's opponent. Whereas sports agon is connected with temporal sequels, which negate the risk of death but uphold the value of victory at a higher level than the one of life.

Agonal behavior is kept and cultivated in a sports context where it reaches a high form of competitions and games. Adding to this is: “in war, rule exists wholly as a result of victory; in sports victory exists as a result of rule” [4, p. 31]. The transformation of agon and its role in society are not obvious. Some concepts such as pseudo-agonal or post-agonal are used for the transmission of real agon into its present symbolic form. The wish to fight, to find the best, is a constitutive aspect of personality and society. This agon motive has a different shape in various historical and cultural environments, and it is seen in some form in every culture. Throughout the centuries, real antagonism was substituted by symbolic modalities. The most important part from these symbolic forms of the agon motive is sports.

* Corresponding author.

Pain – an authentic part of war agon

In any case, it is necessary to present the topic of pain within a war agon. We can find even a brutal description of pain in battle, for example, in ancient Greek texts. Let us look at some examples from Homer's Iliad. We apologize for using a Czech translation of this Greek epic, and we understand that the reader can find a definitely better quality translation in a more strict poetic context. However, the meanings of these words would be the same:

- He stubbed a pike into his brow, and penetrated into the entrails of bones.
- The pike cut his tongue across the back set of his teeth.
- The blade of huge shaft enmeshed in his innards from below.
- A wounded person rattled with effort and he falls out from the elegant vehicle.
- He interposed into the middle of throat, till painful peak throughout penetrated his nape.

We can suppose that similar or even greater levels of pain are an essential part of every war agon, including such contemporary war conflicts as in Afghanistan or in the terrorist attacks that occur all over the world. Is this pain a part of sports agon as well?

Forms of pain and suffering in sports

We have already said that there are some differences between sports and war agons. However, the question is if the pain in sports and war are one and the same. Before we can answer this question we should look at where pain in sports originates. We can argue four different principles on the purpose of pain in sports:

1. A sign of one's training regime and lifestyle.
2. A sign of maximum exertion to reach top achievement.
3. A sign of a substantial component of a specific sport.
4. A demonstration of lost sports authenticity (disease, injury).

Before we describe these principles (as meaningful levels where we can meet pain in the sports agon), we have to review a few possible approaches in the study of pain.

Possible approaches in the study of pain in sports

These approaches come from Loland's [5] division and could be very interesting and useful. The first possibility is a scientific (medical) approach where pain is understood as a physical phenomenon. The second one is constructivist. Pain is not an independent phenomenon but a product of a social and cultural context. The third approach is phenomenological, which takes into

consideration subjective experiential qualities. Now we can look at each of these approaches in more detail.

Pain as a physical phenomenon

This concept, which is common in our society, originated from the thinking of the philosopher René Descartes. With his philosophy we can interconnect his well-known theory on the division of the human being into two separate substances: the body and the mind. The body is characteristic by it occupying a position in space, it is *res extensa*. Contrarily, the mind is a completely different substance in which we cannot think about space, it is thinking itself, it is *res cogitans*.

Unfortunately, neither Descartes nor his followers solved the connection between these two substances. And to this day it is the most important problem in the Cartesian way of thinking. That is why the body is understood only as separate physical object in a deterministic world. In such a world every situation and every activity could be causally explained. In spite of the fact the problem of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* is still not solved, this understanding of the body is a basic paradigm in a scientific approach. Pain is the process that informs, through sensation, the cognitive parts of an organism (the brain) about the dangers of physical events – disease or injury.

Pain as a cultural and social construction

Besides the natural scientific concept, we can be inspired by sociology and social and cultural anthropology. In this approach, pain is not only a physical phenomenon in a deterministic order of causality (the process of cause and result) but the consequence and product of historical, cultural and social conditions. This anthropological point of view better respects these natural and cultural differences than the formerly mentioned Cartesian concept. The difference in perceiving what pain is and what are its borders differs from society to society in various cultural aspects. Every specific society predestinates what pain is and how to overcome it. As an example we can mention indigenous populations and their initiative rituals and symbols of journey and "crossing over".

Pain as a meaningful phenomenon

Phenomenological philosophy is connected firstly with Edmund Husserl. He developed the philosophy of Franz Brentano and his emphasis of the medieval concept of intentionality. It is based on the thought that our consciousness is always focused on the subject of our interest; it cannot be free of thought. This specific method of phenomenology is based on phenomenological reduction, which makes it possible for us to progress from appearances and phenomena toward

their concrete substance. It is a method for understanding existential topics, an area of meaning and purpose where the key role is played by experience. However, this does not mean this is subjectivism! Husserl's thoughts are compatible with transcendental subjectivity. What phenomenological thought offers is the ability to enrich the study of pain in sports as a reflection of intentional consciousness. So the experienced phenomena refer to the meaning of pain. We can hardly find any other way of philosophy which allows for a better understanding of the field of meaning, including the meaning of pain in sports.

**Pain and suffering:
a training regime and a way of living**

Based on the above review of the different approaches on the study of pain, we can go back to the four forms of pain which were defined earlier as the basic areas of pain in sports. The first sphere where we can meet pain in sports is in one's training regime and lifestyle. What is notable at first sight is the strict training regime of top athletes, which can be compared to the monastic way of life in a friary. Asceticism, which is interconnected with the lifestyle of athletes, makes them to give up many of the gratifying activities and pleasures common for ordinary people. The extreme example is fakeers, who connect asceticism with the willful experience of pain. Such a punishing lifestyle pushes motor efficiency to its biological limits. When we reach the natural limits of our human capabilities, increasing our performance is possible through the use of technology or doping. However, reaching one's best achievements in sport is connected nonetheless with pain and suffering.

**Pain and suffering:
maximum exertion to reach top achievement**

A sports champion who devoted his/her life to top achievement is an example of the over-fulfillment of animality to transcendence levels. Exhaustion and attrition can stem from the practical results of the pursuit after maximum output. On the other hand, sports can become a form of ecstasy from the everydayness of life as a form of spiritual overreaching. This way of transcendence, which cannot occur without presence of pain, could be seen as a ritual or a document of the ritualistic character of sports [6]. The parallel between sports and spirituality can be even seen in the fact that sports are "becoming inadvertently one of the forms of natural religion" [7, p. 42].

**Pain and suffering:
an authentic part of the sports experience**

Pain is an authentic part of the sports experience, not only in sports where it is anticipated, such as in

boxing, wrestling, martial arts or other power sports, but also in non-contact sports. We can often find pain in sports situations where it was not even intentional. A ball hitting the face of player could be one of many examples. Even though pain is an essential part of such situations in sports, to overcome it is expression of will winning over corporeality (transcendence). A difference between pain and suffering can also be seen. This difference does not just stand for a more physical character of pain and a mental basis of suffering; it is connected with its consequences. Heidegger [8] speaks about two main modes of attunement: anxiety and fear. Fear is a part of the present existence which endangers a human in some way, which Heidegger considers to be an inauthentic way of attunement. On the other hand, anxiety does not have its own object. Heidegger uses the attunement of anxiety as the means in how to take the human element out of captivity in the objective givenness of the world. We can see a similar (not the same) relationship (such as between fear and anxiety) in the case of pain and suffering. While pain is generally connected with a loss of authenticity, suffering could be an authentic part of physical activity in some specific situations.

**Pain and suffering:
a loss of sports authenticity**

We have mentioned situations where pain is an authentic part of the sports experience. However, we should not neglect pain experienced in sports which proves a loss of its authenticity. Such a modus of pain is a sign of the crisis in sports, which focuses more on results rather than on consequences [3]. (The difference is much more remarkable in the Czech language, where the word "results" is "výsledky" and the word "důsledky" means "consequences".) This substitution of consequence for results is done by a preference for the present over the future, where a bigger emphasis on results has a higher cost on health or honor. And it specifically leads to phenomena which are generally criticized: victory at any cost, the discrimination of unsuccessful athletes, the exaggeration and overemphasis of winners and records, a rise in the levels of aggression, cheating, etc. That could be considered as a cause of the rise in doping, injuries, and these all lead to pain. Therefore, we are witnesses to a historical metamorphosis from a sacral, religious relationship of competition and achievement to the depersonalization of human beings (an instrumentalization of human body and its output).

The horizon of pain: death

An analysis of pain in sports is not possible without at least taking a short glance at the anthropological mind-body problem and its ontological dimension. From many different approaches we can pay witness to Hei-

degger's fundamental ontology. In this type of thought the human being (Dasein) is defined as "a being towards death." Unlike animals, we are conscious of our finiteness, about the impassable horizon that looms ahead of us, about the legacy we leave which nobody can take over in our place. The specific feature of humanity is its temporality. The past is the thrownness (Geworfenheit) while future is the schedule. It means we can project (schedule) our possibilities. The future is open to our activities (in contrary to the past). As it was said, Heidegger distinguishes between two ways of being authentic and inauthentic. The authentic way of being is life where the human being is him/herself when he/she fully executes the possibilities of self-knowledge and self-realization. Contrarily, the inauthentic way of being is characterized by succumbing to the impersonal "the They" (das Man). This means that personality succumbs to the dictation of fashion, the mention in a crowd, because "it is being done", "it is being worn" and so on. When we know about our death as the final horizon, we can schedule our possibilities with a higher level of discretion; it allows us to have a chance at living life more authentically.

Death and sports

In this context the question of death as a consequence of sports activity is more relevant. Could it be the sign of authenticity? There are many occasions in sports where death is present: parachuting, BASE jumping, free-style climbing, full-contact sports etc. What are extreme (high-risk, or adrenaline) sports from the point of view authenticity? What are people looking for through such experiences? Is it still the overcoming of obstacles? Is it just for excitement? Could it be an easier ingress to death?

Is there any desire for the clear and definite confidence of the "love of life" phenomenon, known from stories describing extreme physical achievements in punishing conditions (such as the fictional characters of Jack London's stories about the Gold Rush in Alaska, or the often controversial behavior of real mountaineers in extreme situations)? There, pain can be taken as the reason (not in the masochistic context) why these risky activities are performed. Or perhaps, more often, it can present the acceptable consequence which naturally goes along with doing them. To be able to accept pain, and even the danger of death, can enable some people to uncover the pure phenomenon of "love of life." Death presents in these cases the horizon of pain as well as the horizon of life.

Limits of professional sports: death at the playing field

Contemporarily, we can meet the fact of death not only in extreme sports but in more and more sports

which were considered to be quite safe. For instance, within a period of ten days four soccer players between the ages of 16 to 31 years died during matches due to a heart attack. However, death is not just a sign of overexertion during a game. Death can also arise in the training process. A very important point connected with this increase in the number of mortalities in sports it is not just the old or weak who die, but the young and strong who are the top athletes and well-trained. What does this mean? Generally, it is a sign of a crisis in sports connected with the loss of the authentic way of being, as we have said before. It is represented by the fact that sports are valued more than life.

Crisis in professional sports

We just saw death in sports as result of crisis in sports. What are the purposes of this crisis? Hägele [9] defines three basic features:

- the professionalization of sports structures connected with its oligarchization and bureaucratization,
- its commercialization, meaning the connection of sports to commerce, business and the marketplace,
- its politicization, which is primarily visible in the Olympic Games.

These signs of crisis belong in a sports setting, but they influence the whole of society as well. Hogenová even sees sports as an indoctrinating system, which "holds one in the most manipulative roles in today's world" [10, p. 19].

Meaning of pain and suffering in sports

By connecting Heidegger's idea of authenticity and the phenomenon of pain and suffering can ask about the sense the role of pain plays in sports. Accepting this point of view, the act of performing sports cannot be more important than health or even life. When we are trying to live authentically this means we are looking for the meaning of our being, where sports can be only the means, not the goal, of our being. The possibilities of an authentic existence via the world of sports can be well-seen in the sphere of the Paralympic movement and sports played by disabled persons. Nowadays, the Paralympic Games are the elite sporting event for athletes with a disability, where the athletes' achievements are emphasized over their form of disability. Undoubtedly, sports and physical movement can help disabled athletes to live an *ordinary life*, an authentic life.

Sports as the possibility of an authentic existence offers the development of self-knowledge and self-realization through the realization of values like courage, fairness, respect to others, perfectionism and personal transcendence, among others.

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Correspondence address

Ivo Jirásek
Faculty of Physical Culture
Palacký University Olomouc
Tř. Míru 115
771 11 Olomouc, Czech Republic
e-mail: ivo.jirasek@upol.cz