The Historical Evolution of Violence in Competitive Sport: From Ancient Athletics to Modern Sport

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Abstract

This paper investigates the historical evolution of violence in competitive sports by examining its development and transformation over time. It begins with an exploration of the origins of violence in ancient sporting events, analysing the cultural and societal factors that contributed to its prevalence. The study then traces the gradual shift towards more regulated and controlled sports during the medieval and Renaissance periods, culminating in the establishment of modern sports in the 19th and 20th centuries. Additionally, it discusses the impact of this evolution on athletes' physical and mental well-being, as well as the ethical considerations related to the promotion of aggressive behaviour in sports. Through a comprehensive analysis of the historical development of violence in competitive sports, this paper illuminates the changing attitudes towards sportsmanship and fair play throughout history.

Keywords: Sports Violence; Significant Feature; History of Sport; Observer; Player; Evolution.

Introduction

Violence in competitive sports has been a subject of academic interest and concern throughout history (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Brubaker & Laitin, 1998; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011; Papworth, 1994; Parrott & Giancola, 2007). An advanced search on the academic website using the keyword "violence" in conjunction with "sports" revealed that research hotspots include stadium crowd violence, athletes, aggression, soccer hooliganism, and fan unrest, as indicated in Table 1. From ancient civilizations to the modern era, the evolution of sports has reflected a complex interplay between physical prowess, entertainment, and the inherent risks associated with intense competition. This paper examines the historical progression of violence in competitive sports, tracing its origins from ancient games to contemporary sporting events.

Table 1

High Frequency and High Centrality Keywords in Sports Violence Research

Rank	Keyword	Frequency
1	Stadium crowd violence	11
2	Athletes	8
3	Aggression	8
4	Soccer hooliganism	7
5	Fan unrest	5

In ancient times, sports were not solely about physical prowess or athletic achievement; they also reflected societal values and power dynamics (Batsalel, 2006; Dillon, 1998). For example, the Greeks and Romans conducted gladiatorial contests and chariot races that featured brutal physical confrontations. These events served as entertainment and means to display dominance and assert power, often resulting in severe injuries or even death for the participants, highlighting the extreme nature of these ancient games.

As civilization progressed into the medieval period, sports such as jousting and duelling became popular forms of entertainment. These activities, characterized by intense physical combat and significant risk of harm, were not for the faint-hearted. The medieval era was marked by a culture of chivalry and honour, where violence in sports was viewed as a way to demonstrate bravery and prowess (Abrahams et al., 2014; Bourgois, 2001; Kume, 2023).

The Industrial Revolution brought about significant societal changes, including the emergence of modern sports and the establishment of organized competitions (Coser, 1956; Krug et al., 2002). Despite these advancements, violence persisted, particularly in contact sports such as boxing and wrestling. These sports were characterized by physical aggression and frequently resulted in injuries to participants. The notion of violence as an integral aspect of sports was deeply ingrained in public consciousness, with spectators often seeking out these confrontations for their entertainment value.

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In the 20th century, there has been a notable shift in the perception of violence in sports. With the advent of mass media and increased public scrutiny, awareness of the negative consequences of excessive violence grew. Sporting organizations and governing bodies began to acknowledge the necessity of regulations to mitigate risks and ensure athletes' safety. Consequently, rules and penalties were introduced to discourage violent behaviour and promote fair play (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998; Buhaug, Gates, & Lujala, 2009; Mitchell, 1981).

Recently, the focus has shifted towards creating a safer sporting environment, emphasizing sportsmanship and non-violence (Kalyvas, 2003; Thaler, 2017). The implementation of stricter penalties for violent behaviour, enhancements in training techniques, and advancements in sports medicine have all contributed to a reduction in the prevalence of violence in sports. Nevertheless, occasional incidents continue to occur, underscoring the ongoing challenges in completely eradicating this issue.

In conclusion, the historical evolution of violence in competitive sports mirrors the shifting societal attitudes toward physical aggression and the increasing emphasis on athlete safety. From the brutality of ancient games to the contemporary focus on fair play, the journey towards a violence-free sporting environment has been both lengthy and challenging. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of this evolution, elucidating the factors that have shaped the relationship between violence and sports throughout history.
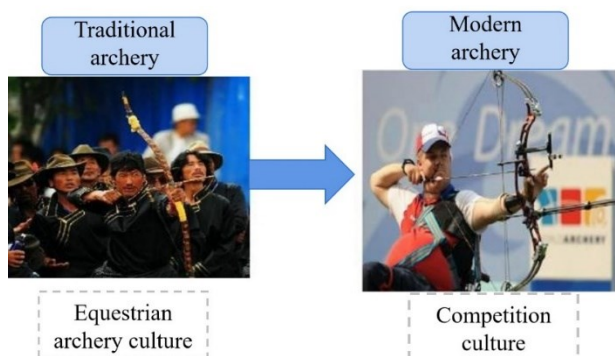

Figure 1: The Historical Evolution of Violence in Athletics.

Sports Violence

Sports violence encompasses various hostile and malicious actions, including physical, verbal, and gestural assaults, perpetrated by individuals influenced by psychological factors during competitive games (Dexter, 2007; Fox & Hoelscher, 2012; Huntington, 1996). Such violence commonly occurs between spectators and athletes, among athletes themselves, and among spectators.

Forms of Violence in Sport

Brawl

Brawls can occur not only between players but also involve officials, coaches, and spectators at sporting events. For instance, "soccer hooliganism" remains a significant issue in several countries, particularly in the United Kingdom. Additionally, there appears to be a "tradition" of fighting in ice hockey. Given that players wear ice skates and move at high speeds, the friction and physical impact often lead to violent clashes. Consequently, fighting has been incorporated into the game management system. The victor of a brawl may receive a minor five-minute penalty, while the stadium crowd typically shows disdain for the loser.

Bullying

Bullying manifests in various forms within the realm of sports. Instances may range from physical coercion, such as compelling new team members to endure exhaustive fitness exercises, to psychological intimidation, wherein senior players subject newcomers to ridicule or humiliating tasks. Furthermore, there exists a disturbing facet of bullying involving sexual assault, characterized by secrecy and underreporting within actual sporting contexts. While reports of such incidents are scarce, both women, often deemed more vulnerable, and men can fall victim to sexual assault due to power imbalances. Moreover, alcohol, frequently intertwined with misconduct, is frequently utilized in instances of sports violence, exemplified by instances where recruits are coerced into excessive drinking.

Illegality

In organized sports, the foundation lies in rules that all participating athletes are expected to adhere to, with organizers tasked with ensuring compliance. Typically, rules are neither inadvertent (such as instinctively reaching out to touch the ball in soccer) nor deliberate (lightly touching the ball in soccer). A foul is recognized as an intentional breach of a rule intended to harm an opponent to some extent.
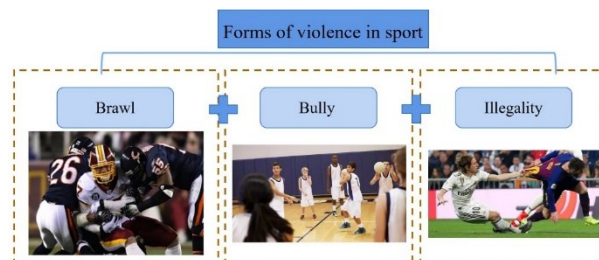

Figure 2: Forms of Violence in Sport.

Competitive Attributes of Violence in Sport

Athletic sports inherently encompass varying degrees of confrontational elements. In sports such as basketball, soccer, field hockey, and rugby, physical collisions, blocking,

and grabbing among players are inevitable and are considered essential skills for athletes (Arnold, 2001; Black, 2010; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004; Tenser, 2005; Tylor, 1871; Warjiyati et al., 2023). Using basketball as an illustration, while reasonable physical confrontation is permitted within the game's framework, frontal collisions are deemed fouls, including offensive fouls and blocking fouls. The distinction between physical confrontation and impact can be blurred in the heat of the moment (Čvorović, 2023), as athletes may become so engrossed in the game that they either overlook specific rules or intentionally disregard them to disrupt the game's rhythm.

Many athletes grapple with the inherent conflict of competitive sports, wherein they must balance the desire to win at all costs with upholding moral and ethical sporting conduct. Male athletes, in particular, may feel culturally pressured to embody masculinity and toughness, potentially leading them to pursue victory through violent or unorthodox means. In contact sports, violent behaviour is often perceived as a professional necessity, with tangible consequences for failing to exhibit it. Athletes are frequently urged to endure pain during training and competition while simultaneously inflicting "pain" on others, lest they face ridicule from coaches and peers. The essence of athletics lies in its triadic nature: physical, athletic, and competitive. Athletics are intrinsically tied to the body and demand physical skills such as running, jumping, throwing, and more. Due to the inherent uncertainty and variability of athletic endeavours, athletes must exert themselves to achieve their desired outcomes or meet the expectations of others, which constitutes the allure and appeal of athletics.
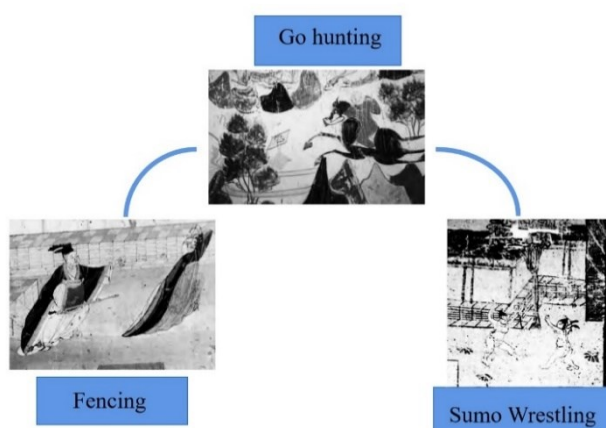

Figure 3: Competitive Attributes of Violence in Sport.

The Impact of a Culture of Violence in Sport

In primitive societies, violence emerged as a survival mechanism in the face of a harsh natural environment. In modern society, where there is no outlet for this inherent violence, it becomes recurrently repressed, albeit temporarily. However, prolonged repression of this pent-up desire for violence poses a potential risk of societal security and stability (Holman, 2004; Weinstein, Smith, & Wiesenthal, 1995). Utilizing sports as a platform to channel this excess repressed energy offers a safe and civilized means of catharsis. Despite the technological and civilizational advancements allowing people to watch sporting events remotely, the convenience of media also presents challenges. Event broadcasters, in pursuit of attracting viewers for financial gain, may excessively exploit violence in sports as a marketing tactic, thereby normalizing violent behaviour. Over time, the moral compass regarding violent events may become skewed, reducing violence to a mere commodity. Unrestricted proliferation of violence may breed unnecessary social conflicts and, in extreme cases, contribute to the regression of civilization and societal collapse (Comstock & Fields, 2005; Finkel, 2002; Popkin et al., 2017).

The influence of the culture of violence in sports subtly shapes the trajectory of nations: the greater emphasis a nation places on sports culture, the stronger its martial spirit becomes, potentially leading to a more prosperous future (Juhn et al., 2002; Lewis & George, 1996). Sports indoctrination extends beyond physical and spiritual development, fostering qualities such as discipline, resilience, and upward mobility. The concept of "civilized spirit, barbaric body" finds historical validation in the transformative power of sports. By refining physical capabilities and harnessing the inherent "savagery" of the body through sports, nations can establish the foundational elements for prosperity and resilience.
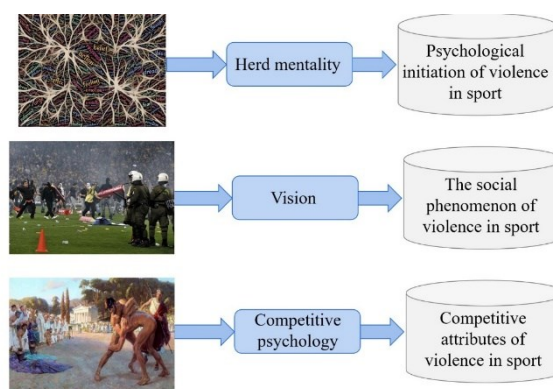

Figure 4: Causes of Violence in Competitive Sports.

The Historical Evolution of Violence in Athletics

The Sprouting of Violence in Competitive Sports in the Ancient Greek Era

During the ancient Greek period, the inception of what can be termed as "wrestling" marked the earliest form of organized

sports. By the 18th century, this sport had spread to France, heralding the genesis and evolution of sports competition. Concurrently, alongside the emergence of sports competition, its competitive, extreme, and violent nature also became apparent. As the conceptual distinction between spectators and participants solidified, sports violence underwent corresponding historical transformations.

In ancient Greek boxing, regulations were scant, limited mainly to prohibitions against scratching the opponent's eyes and biting with the mouth. The contests were brutal, with fighters employing various tactics and deliberately inflicting dislocations and fractures on their opponents, regardless of weight class, until one conceded defeat or collapsed. Consequently, fighters often emerged from

matches entirely disfigured. However, as the roles of athletic participants evolved and the gap between spectators and participants widened, a more refined regulation of athletic conduct ensued, leading to some degree of control over the pursuit of violence (Miedzian, 2002).

This era of sports violence, expressed through early forms of physical aggression, exhibits notable parallels. Rules and measures for blood control remained rudimentary, akin to the ancient Greek era where wrestling competitions allowed actions that are largely prohibited in modern wrestling, such as targeting the opponent's vital areas. This aspect has persisted and even intensified in subsequent iterations of sports violence.

Table 2

Attributes of Sports Violence in the Ancient Greek

Cultural Property	Secular Property
The unique polytheistic beliefs have resulted in various forms of rituals, among which sports competitions are also an essential form of rituals	Athletic competition is both a necessary training for citizens to become adults on a physical level, but also a necessary process to become adults on a mental level

Shifting Forms of Violence in Ancient Roman Era Athletics

The ancient Roman sport of gladiatorial combat epitomized a significant shift in the dynamics of sporting violence within the "spectator-participant" relationship. Whether involving enslaved combatants or battles between gladiators and beasts, the outcomes invariably resulted in bloodshed and fatalities, making this period a stark representation of violent spectacle. However, the evolution of spectatorship and its impact on participants progressed steadily, notably with the increasing politicization of the sport and alterations in regulatory frameworks.

In the arena, gladiators served as conduits for spectators, allowing citizens to engage in the exercise of state power.

Witnessing gladiatorial contests fulfilled the populace's desire to participate in political processes, with spectators actively involved in adjudicating the fate of combatants, determining whether they would live or die. In ancient Rome, spectators even wielded influence over the destinies of certain participants. This dual relationship between audience utilization of gladiators and the dependence of gladiators on spectators led to a reversal of power dynamics, wherein the audience held significant sway over the participants. Despite the overt brutality of the gladiatorial sport, the heightened influence of spectators imposed additional constraints on physical violence in sports, a trend that became more pronounced during the Byzantine Empire.

Table 3

Attributes of Sports Violence in the Ancient Rome

Political Property	Entertainment Property
Gladiators serve as intermediaries for spectators (citizens) to participate in the exercise of State power, and watching gladiatorial spectacles satisfies the population's desire for power	Inherited the characteristics of sport as a religious ritual act and has bred a distinct recreational nature

Medieval Times Athletic Violence

The shifting dynamics of the "spectator-participant" relationship in medieval knightly jousting led to a gradual transition from bloody combat to a focus on skill and

elegance. Between the 11th and early 16th centuries, tournaments predominantly featured duels between two knights, governed by simplistic rules akin to actual warfare. Instances such as the demise of Henry II following injuries sustained in a 1559 tournament and the

tumultuous Lance tournament in Valladolid in 1517 underscored the hazardous nature of these events. However, from the mid-16th century onwards, there was a gradual refinement of game regulations, accompanied by restrictions on the number of participants, tournament formats, and equipment. By the 17th century, the zenith of chivalric sports was reached, with jousting tournaments evolving into spectacles for entertainment.

A pivotal historical indication of this transformation is evident in the evolution of the lance tournament, which witnessed numerous injuries and fatalities in the early 16th century. This prompted the emergence of a new tournament format, the "Ring Rodeo and Wooden Target Shooting," which eschewed direct combat. Instead, emphasis was placed on dexterity, agility, and the amalgamation of force with grace, elegance, and refined manners. As participants assumed a dominant role in shaping this relationship, the regulation of violence in sports transcended mere adherence to rules, venues, and participant status; it also encompassed etiquette and skill. These elements permeated athletic conduct, tempering the expression of physical violence in sports.

Modern Competitive Sports Violence

Within the realm of sports, fundamental principles such as equality among participants irrespective of gender, age, culture, or nationality, as well as the concept of fairness where each participant enjoys equitable rights and interests regardless of power or wealth, prevail. These foundational tenets of sports serve to dismantle societal injustices stemming from class disparities and wealth distribution in early societies, illuminating the inherent virtue of human nature - justice - through sports. Both the destructive aspect of violence and the disruptive potential of sports in challenging class power structures serve as paradigms for dismantling primitive frameworks, with their essential attributes intertwining to facilitate the targeted and controlled expression of life's inherent violence through sports.

In modern social contexts, sports serve as platforms for individuals to manifest their violent tendencies, with notable distinctions evident between contemporary and early forms of soccer, each imbued with diverse social values reflective of people's emotional needs. When emotions run high, individuals may gravitate towards sports or confrontational sporting events as outlets for their expression. In modern times, violence no longer serves as a survival imperative, as acts causing harm to life and property are subject to legal repercussions and moral censure. Nevertheless, within the constraints of contemporary social norms, innate human violence remains concealed and repressed. Serving as a conduit for releasing suppressed emotions, sports effectively elevate vitality and provide solace to the mind, garnering widespread respect and playing a significant societal role. By facilitating the effective release of stress and dissatisfaction, sports contribute to enhancing individuals' overall well-being and fostering happier, more fulfilling lives. Even instances of violence occurring within the context of sports are often accepted and tolerated by society.

Table 4

Attributes of Sports Violence in the Modern Age

Invisible Ideas in Sports	Tangible Forms of Management
The study and popularization of the Marxist philosophy of "holistic human development" and the introduction of sport to control physical violence.	The centre of power in the sports sectional system - rules restrain disorderly physical violence

Figure 5: Modern Competitive Sports Violence.

Sociocultural Influences on Violence in Competitive Sports at Different Historical Stages

Violence has exhibited diverse manifestations across different historical epochs, delineating into explicit and implicit forms. Explicit manifestations were evident in ancient Greece, manifested through both sporting activities and warfare, where violent behaviour was perceived as essential for safeguarding the nation's safety and security, thus deemed legitimate. In contemporary rule-of-law

societies characterized by robust legal frameworks, the prevalence of warfare and life-or-death situations has diminished, leading to a shift in the manifestation of violent behaviour towards more covert expressions.

In this context, hidden violence gradually supplants explicit violence, as the latter is subject to legal repercussions. Consequently, individuals have redirected their violent tendencies towards alternative outlets, such as sports competitions. These highly competitive events often entail the risk of injuries among athletes, yet simultaneously serve as a source of sensory stimulation for spectators. Observing the intensity of competition, the vigour displayed by athletes, and the charged atmosphere of the game allows spectators to experience excitement and exhilaration.

Hence, it appears that sports violence holds practical utility beyond mere entertainment value. For sports spectators, the pursuit extends beyond rational and ethical considerations to encompass the thrill of witnessing electrifying moments and the passionate outbursts that accompany them.
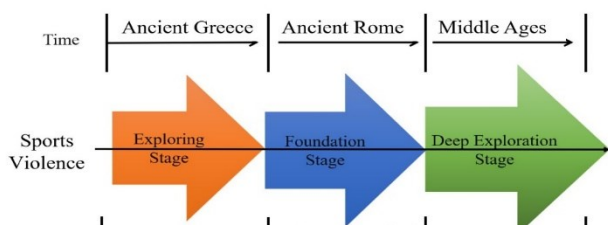

Figure 6: The Vein of Violence in Competitive Sports at Different Historical Stages.

Analysing the history of sports violence through the lens of the "spectator-participant" relationship transcends a mere chronological compilation, offering insights into the inevitability and contingency inherent in historical processes. Across epochs from Ancient Greece to Ancient Rome to the Middle Ages, the evolution of this relationship has spurred shifts in the nature of violence in sports. This process underscores both historical continuity and episodic components: the external regulation of physical violence in sports - encompassing rules, venues, and restrictions on participant status - and the internal regulation - involving etiquette, technique, etc. - have been pivotal factors shaping this evolution, alongside the emergence of new forms of violence in sports.

The gradual expansion and refinement of control mechanisms over etiquette and technique represent historical continuity, while instances of bloodshed in sports violence serve as episodic occurrences. Such nuanced understandings cannot be adequately captured through a simplistic compilation of historical events. Consequently, a more direct practical value emerges, emphasizing the pivotal role of the association between spectators and participants in shaping sports violence. Modifying this association and altering the manner in which participants express violence are crucial strategies for mitigating the potential for its deleterious and bloody outcomes.
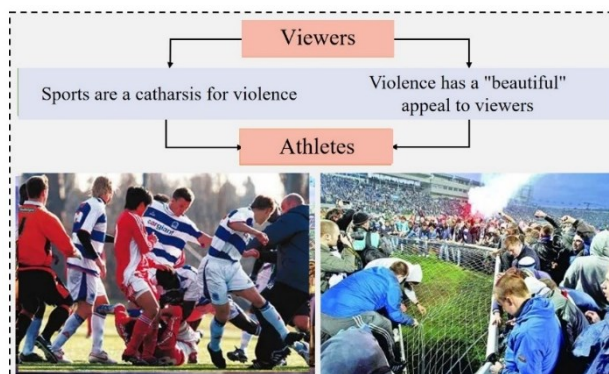

Figure 7: Ways in Which the Audience and Participants Relate to Each Other.

The impact of sports in contemporary society is profound, echoing the enduring legacy of the ancient Olympic Games. The modern iteration of the Olympics, following the tradition of its ancient counterpart, adheres to a quadrennial schedule, with the theme of peace remaining steadfast - a global recognition and observance of a truce between conflicting parties during the Olympic Games. Warfare, epitomizing the pinnacle of violence, has opted for restraint and dissolution in the face of humanity's remarkable physical and cultural endeavours.

Furthermore, the burgeoning humanistic consciousness in modern times has facilitated a deeper understanding of the nexus between the human body and violence. This comprehension extends beyond the mere physical representation of the body to elucidate the intrinsic connections between them. The manifestations of life's violence within physical activities undergo varied interpretations across different epochs, spanning from analogous violence in Ancient Greece to the bloodshed of ancient Roman gladiatorial competitions. In the early medieval period, marked by the suppression of physical activities due to asceticism, life's violence was constrained within this unfavourable social milieu. Subsequently, in the modern era, as the process of deconstructing sports commenced, a pivotal focus emerged on the creation, guidance, and significance of anthropology as a central element.
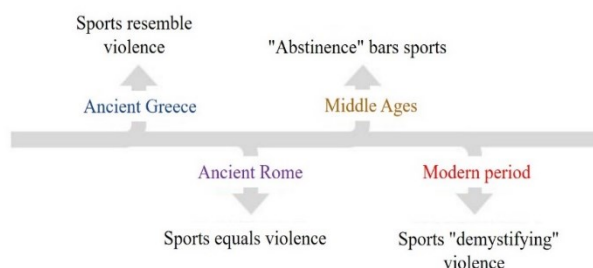

Figure 8: The Relationship Between Sport and Violence in History.

Discussion

The dialectical notion that sports can mitigate the inherent violence of life encapsulates the humanistic essence of sports: recognizing that violence is an intrinsic attribute of humanity, sports serve to temper this aspect, preventing individuals from being stifled or afflicted by it. This ethos reflects a "people-centric" humanistic concern, whereby sports promote physical well-being and foster healthy societal development.

The fusion of life's violence and sports epitomizes the concept of "holistic human development": through engagement in sports, life's violence undergoes a transformative process, culminating in the cultivation of a robust physique and unwavering spirit, thereby contributing significantly to individual development. In the context of a civilized society, sports offer a constructive outlet for the expression of life's violence while nurturing individuals, aligning with the ethos of "holistic human development."

The historical interplay between sports and life's violence illustrates a dialectical negation of negation. Ancient Greece's sporting pursuits bore resemblances to manifestations of violence, while Ancient Rome's blood-drenched gladiatorial combats epitomized extreme violence. Conversely, in the Early Middle Ages, under the sway of asceticism, sporting activities were curtailed, inhibiting the expression of life's violent elements and stifling the essence of human nature. However, the resurgence of humanism in modern times rekindled the imperative for human nature, heralding the revival of sports on the historical stage. In this contemporary era, humanism's awakening to the necessity of human nature and the re-emergence of sports intersect, with the hierarchical sports system serving as a societal mechanism to regulate physical violence within sports. Furthermore, Marxist philosophy's tenet of "comprehensive human development" serves as an ideological liberation for the realization of the "complete human being," collaborating with the sports hierarchy system to address physical violence in sports. These four epochs exhibit a developmental trajectory akin to the negation of negation principle.

Sport assumes a pivotal cultural role in civilizational progress by rationalizing the cultivation of "primal instincts": recognizing that humanity embodies both sensuality and rationality, societal advancement necessitates the harmonization of spiritual refinement with the vital energy of "primal instincts." This "primal" cultural ethos enables the preservation of societal civility and the sustenance of sports without engendering social harm, epitomizing the inclusive and dialectical essence of sports culture.

Conclusion

The historical progression of violence within competitive sports unfolds as a multifaceted narrative, spanning from ancient competitions to contemporary sports. While violence has long been intertwined with human competitive instincts, the transition of sports into organized and regulated endeavours has notably curbed the prevalence of physical aggression. This paper delves into the historical evolution of violence in competitive sports, tracing its trajectory from antiquity to modern times. It scrutinizes the intrinsic link between violence and human competitiveness across epochs, while also highlighting the moderating influence of organized and regulated sports activities on its expression.

Modern sports underscore principles of fair play, skill, and strategic prowess, prioritizing attributes such as discipline, teamwork, and respect for adversaries. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that instances of violence persist within contemporary sports, albeit in more nuanced and controlled forms. The competitive nature of sports occasionally fosters heated confrontations, unsportsmanlike conduct, and sporadic acts of aggression. Nonetheless, commendable efforts have been exerted by sports governing bodies, coaches, and athletes themselves to foster sportsmanship and deter violence within the sporting arena.

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