

## Justifications for Unethical Behaviour in Sport: The Role of the Coach

This issue marks the launch by the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) of its first peer review article — Justifications for Unethical Behaviour in Sport: The Role of the Coach by Ann Dodge and Brenda Robertson. Following this inaugural issue, a peer-reviewed research edition of the [Journal](#) will be published once a year with manuscripts accepted on an ongoing basis and published in the language in which they are written.

The [Journal](#) welcomes submissions for authors who are conducting research on coaching and women. Submissions may consist of applied research, position papers, reviews, or critical essays. Research methodologies may be quantitative or qualitative and may use data gathered through historical analysis, surveys, fieldwork, action research, participant observation, content analysis, simulations or experiments. Studies most appropriate for the [Journal](#) are those focusing on issues critical to the advancement of women in coaching and investigations of the challenges unique to their needs. — Sheila Robertson



Beckie Scott is Canada's first cross country skier to stand on the Olympic podium, her bronze medal now upgraded to gold after drug cheats are penalized.

### Abstract

In search for a competitive edge, some athletes engage in unethical behaviour. This research addresses the justifications varsity athletes offer for engaging in unethical behaviour. A central theme of the paper is the role of the coach, both as a source of motivation for engagement in various types of unethical behaviour and as an advocate for ethical practises. Particular emphasis is placed upon understanding the experience of female athletes. Some occurred under certain circumstances. Clear gender differences were indicated in all aspects of the study, with females reporting lower levels of agreement with all justifications for unethical behaviour than males.

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### Justifications for Unethical Behaviour in Sport: The Role of the Coach

by Ann Dodge and Brenda Robertson

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It is almost a truism that socialization into sports nowadays has as much to do with becoming adept at breaking and bending the rules, not to mention other forms of cheating and violence, as it does with furtherance of athletic excellence (Morgan, 2002).

#### Introduction

Sport can be a vehicle for teaching positive lessons, and those lessons come from involvement in activity where ethical dilemmas occur frequently. The way one reacts when faced with an ethical dilemma is influenced by beliefs that are based upon individual values. Our values are shaped by experiences as well as by significant others who influence our lives including parents, teachers, coaches, and friends. If we have been influenced in such a way as to value winning above personal excellence, sportsmanship, and honour, that will be reflected in our approach to participation in sport (Dodge, 1998). Recent work by Robertson (2002), which investigated primary influences of sport and recreation on youth, reported that coaches were more influential than parents and teachers, and second only to friends. From the athlete perspective, little is known about the personal values that influence participation in sport or how those values are shaped.

Ethics is the sub-discipline of philosophy that is concerned with issues of right and wrong. That being the case, sport today is a haven of opportunity for ethical analysis. However, while the more tangible and scientific aspects of sport, such as assessing specific elements of human performance in a laboratory, have received considerable attention by researchers, the moral component of sport behaviour has received comparatively little. It is not that ethical issues are not of interest, but rather that they are often overshadowed by our desire to conduct research that will help athletes go higher, faster, and grow stronger.

This focus on the physical prowess of high performance athletes, especially in professional sport, has created an environment characterized by self-interest and self-gain. Because of broad exposure by the media, this narcissistic approach permeates down through other levels of sport. Even at the varsity levels, where the values of amateurism and education are foundational, student athletes often go to the highest bidder who can offer them the most in terms of material gain. Throughout the entire sport system are examples where adherence to moral principles is sadly lacking.

One of the factors that has constrained attention being paid to cheating in sport is the lack of agreement by ethicists on conceptual issues. In a 1988 article, Shogan posited that sport was not structured to monitor ethical behaviour, only legal behaviour that relates to adherence with the rules. Since breaking the rules in cases such as a "good foul" is considered to be game strategy, doing so is not necessarily considered to be an issue of ethics. Sport officials can only act on rule infractions, not whether the intention behind the cheating was ethical or not. Morgan (2002) distinguished between abstract moral discourses on sport and the need for agreement by those in the sport community as to what actually constitutes acceptable ethical behaviour. If the normative crisis in varsity sport is to be addressed, a communicative action approach is required where those involved in sport reach consensus on how the game is to be played and what is

considered to be ethical behaviour. In the meantime, navigating the minefield of ethics is left to athletes and coaches.

The work of Shogan (1988) and Morgan (2002) raised the question of whether or not engagement in specific behaviours, considered by some to be unethical or at least questionable, are actually viewed as such by the athletes themselves. Given that ethicists are not in agreement as to what constitutes appropriate ethical behaviour, is it any wonder that athletes are challenged by the concepts of what is right or wrong when it comes to appropriate behaviour in sport?

Coaches fill important socially sanctioned roles, roles that carry certain rights and responsibilities. Included in the responsibilities is teaching through example. Coaches have a role to play in facilitating the development of moral reasoning skills in athletes by suggesting appropriate behaviours and condemning those considered to be socially unacceptable (Drewe, 2003). Coaches have the power and authority to monitor ethical behaviour. For instance they can bench a player for a moral transgression while a game official generally cannot. Coaches are well positioned to teach athletes about moral behaviour, set standards and expectations for athletes, monitor their behaviour, and take punitive action if lines are crossed. Coaches are often best positioned to recognize ethical misconduct and should be concerned with the moral development of their athletes.

The ultimate goal in sport is to win, and whether winning is defined as a personal best or securing first place and the associated gold medal, participants do play to win. In some cases, at the more elite levels of sport, winning may bring with it extrinsic benefits such as the opportunity to compete at a higher level (as with national team athletes attempting to make an Olympic team), or the opportunity to play a sport professionally and therefore realize financial gains. Some purists would argue that satisfaction from winning should be based on performing well, competing within prescribed rules, and defeating a worthy opponent (Osterhoudt, 1991). But at times, athletes feel excessive pressure to win, and particularly when extrinsic rewards are at stake, they may resort to questionable behaviours in an attempt to ensure victory.

For some athletes, the desire (and pressure) to win causes them to look for ways to gain an advantage over their competition including engaging in behaviours that may supersede the realm of acceptable sport behaviour. There are many ways in which athletes attempt to gain an advantage over their opponents, but the common thread is that the rules are somehow circumvented. This is done through illegal modifications to equipment, through the use of banned or illegal performance-enhancing drugs, by bending or breaking the rules, or by any other means as they conspire to gain the upper hand against an opponent.

Not all athletes resort to these types of illegal behaviours in order to achieve success in sport. However, both male and female athletes encounter moral dilemmas throughout their careers where decisions must be made about how to react in situations that test one's ethical beliefs. Crown and Heatherington (1989) as well as Clopton and Sorell (1993) found that while men and women appear to engage in similar moral reasoning when considering the appropriate course of action in competitive athletic encounters, due to socialization, women may conceive of morality differently than men do. Decker and Lasley (1995) reported that boys and girls actually differ in moral reasoning, and that boys more readily adopt a self-interest perspective in sport than do girls.

Regardless of sex, athletes routinely face ethical situations as part of their sport experiences and they must decide how to react. Often those decisions revolve around whether to engage in certain behaviours in order to gain an advantage. Presumably, the way one reacts when faced with an ethical dilemma is influenced by personal beliefs based upon individual values. Values are shaped by a myriad of external factors, not the least of which for athletes is the influence of their coaches. Although much has been written about the relationship between athletes and coaches,

the influence of coaches on the ethical decision- making of athletes is an issue that has gone largely unexplored in the literature.

This research attempts to address that void by exploring the concept of ethical behaviour from the perspective of the athletes. Notwithstanding Shogan's (1988) arguments as to whether violating the rules of sport is a legal or moral issue, the fact is that regardless of motivation, varsity athletes know when they are acting in ways that are not in accordance with the rules of the game and understand that those actions are considered by many to be unethical. Whether or not athletes engage in behaviour that clearly violates the rules of sport and the justifications for doing so were examined. Central to this investigation is the role of the coach in suggesting engagement in various types of questionable behaviours. Particular emphasis is placed upon understanding the experience of female athletes with implications for female coaches.

## Literature Review

In her 1988 article, Shogan discussed the legal versus moral distinction as it relates to behaviour in sport. She identified three types of rules in sport: descriptive rules that lay out technical specifications such as court dimensions, proscriptive rules that identify actions in which an athlete must engage such as dribbling a basketball, and proscriptive rules that identify actions an athlete must not perform. Such rules are all considered to be morally neutral. Prescriptive rules are generally broken only by unskilled athletes. Proscriptive rules are often broken as game strategy, such as fouling an opponent hoping to gain possession of a basketball after the penalty throw. Officials are only responsible for monitoring legal transgressions, not moral ones. A neutral rule only becomes a moral concern when a player is counting on other players not to break certain rules, but one intentionally does. There is generally no authority in sport charged with the responsibility to monitor morality. Moral wrongdoing often coincides with legal wrongdoing, but sport officials penalize only the legal wrongdoing.

Twelve years later, Shogan, along with her collaborator Ford (2000), was calling for a new sport ethic. Inspired by Eugen's critique of sport ethicists, König, Shogan, and Ford situated this new sport ethic in the work of the French philosopher Foucault. König (1995) was critical of sport ethicists because they concern themselves mainly with compliance with proscriptive rules while completing disregarding issues and practices that are causing real harm to athletes as being ethical matters. König suggested that work focusing exclusively on rule adherence does not deserve to be considered ethical criticism.

As sport ethicists, Shogan and Ford (2000) took the criticism to heart. Using Foucault's approach to ethics, they suggested that rather than the limited focus on rules, sport ethics should be concerned with athletes' understanding of how sport shapes them as people. The underlying assumption was that if athletes understand the logic of the rules, they will comply with the rules. However, when rules exist that are harmful to the health and wellbeing of athletes, the athletes must challenge those rules publicly. This is not done by breaking the rules, but rather by refusing to engage in behaviour that is counter to one's values. If ethics becomes less about compliance with rules and more about understanding the impact of the rules, athletes could become more accountable for their own conduct. However, at the present time, this is not the reality. Ethics is still all about rule compliance. Certain athletes are not following the rules, but little is known about their justification for doing so.

Morgan (2002) also expressed the need for athletes and members of the sport community to become more involved in discourse about the rules of sport. Seeking to better understanding the moral dilemmas presently plaguing sport, he examined Habermas's (1990) critical theory of society. He purports that to understand social practice such as sport, one must look at moral ideals and values. Habermas's moral theory looks to moral commitments that underlie social practice such as sport and why moral commitments have broken down. To Habermas,

communicative action includes actions either oriented to reaching consensus or rooted in consensus as to how people are to conduct themselves. Those goals and means of achieving them are a product of agreement.

Morgan (2002) posited that agreements about what is acceptable in sport shape the moral character of sport. Since the norms of fair play supposedly guide sport and are mutually agreed to, it should be understood that no one shall break the rules for self-advantage. Thus the rules become the moral underpinnings of sport. Looking at sport today, one could assume that communicative action has little to do with such underpinnings. However, using Habermas's (1990) theory, Morgan suggested that sport is still governed by an underlying moral consensus because it does place limits on what is considered to be acceptable. He offered as evidence the public moral outrage at high-profile incidents of cheating in sport, which means the existence of an ethical line that the public is not willing to have crossed. This suggests that sport and how it is played does matter to the public and that as such, communicative action is an important part of sport.

However, Morgan (2002) felt that to address the issues in sport, concrete ethical solutions are required rather than abstract moral ones. This requires probing the beliefs and values of peers. The problem Morgan saw with external moral principles that come from outside the practice is that the practical connection is missing so adherence is always open to personal interpretation. He suggested that the need exists to come up with internal, practice-dependent reasons as to why it is important to treat one's competitors in ethically appropriate ways in accordance with certain standards of excellence. This is better than an external general moral framework based upon abstract concepts.

The difference between moral and ethical discourse is that morality has to do with universally held beliefs in certain values and norms, whereas ethics is a local matter that seeks agreement among athletes that certain beliefs and values are worth holding. Little research to date has addressed issues of ethics directly with athletes themselves. If, as Morgan (2002) suggested, addressing ethical issues requires developing an agreed-upon set of values and norms, the opinions of athletes on such matters must be investigated.

Although there exist volumes of literature devoted to the positive ideals of sport (Arnold, 1994; Eitzen, 1988; Feezell, 1988; Hyland, 1990; Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller, 1994; Orlick, 1995; Ross, 1989; Shogan, 1988; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996; vanOosten, 1989), existing literature is devoid of work that provides illumination on how certain athletes justify engagement in unethical actions and what influence coaches may have over associated outcomes. During the past 15 years, literature has reported various unethical means used to gain an advantage in sport. However, what is lacking is the perspective of the athletes themselves who engage in such behaviours.

The over-emphasis on winning and the potential benefits of victory are the greatest motivators for cheating in sport (Blackhurst, Schneider & Strachan, 1991; Dubin, 1990; Eitzen, 1988; Hyland, 1990; Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller, 1994). The belief that others are doing the same thing and cheating is therefore justified is one possible explanation for such behaviours (Boudreau & Konzak, 1991; Cowart, 1989; McPherson, Curtis & Loy, 1989). If there is a chance of not being caught, certain athletes might be inclined to cheat, hoping to get away with it (Feezell, 1988; vanOosten, 1989). The pressure to win can, and often does, come from the coach. Many coaches have a great deal of power over their athletes (Blackhurst et al., 1991; Burke, 2001; Clifford & Feezell, 1997; Dubin, 1990; Laios, Theodorakis & Gargalianos, 2003; Sherman, Fuller & Speed, 2000), and if it is perceived that the coach condones or promotes unethical behaviour, athletes may be caught in a situation where they feel they must do what the coach suggests. In such cases, the justification for cheating is directly influenced by the coach (Blackhurst et al., 1991; Eitzen, 1988; Gibbons, 1994).

Engagement in unethical behaviour in sport has traditionally been associated with male athletes, reflecting their dominance of sport, especially at the elite levels. Increasingly, however, similar behaviours have been observed among female athletes (McPherson et al., 1989). As the number of women participating in sport increases, the escalation in unethical behaviour among female sport participants can be explained in various ways including increased value placed on winning as women's sport has become more competitive and professionalized; women becoming socialized into sport by a process similar to males and learning similar values, norms, and behaviours; and women wanting to be perceived as equal to male athletes and, thereby, demonstrating valued male behaviours (McPherson et al.).

### Justifications for Unethical Behaviour in Sport

Although the philosophical debate continues as to whether certain actions are in fact unethical in sport or are part of sport culture, research indicates that high performance athletes themselves know the rules by which sport is to be played. Various justifications for doing so appear in the literature. These include the belief that everyone else is doing it and that makes it justifiable; that the end justifies the means and so as long as one wins, the tactics used don't matter; that if one does not get caught engaging in unethical acts then doing so is fair game; and if it is perceived that the coach approves of, or in fact requests, certain unethical actions, the athlete is somehow no longer responsible for his or her actions.

### Everyone else is doing it.

Athletes realize that at least some of their competitors unethically enhance their performance through questionable means and, therefore, they may be putting themselves at a disadvantage if they don't do the same thing (Heikkala, 1993). The rationale of "others are doing the same thing" was the justification stated by the coach of Ben Johnson in 1990 during the Commission of Inquiry into the Use of Drugs and Banned Practices Intended to Increase Athletic Performance (Dubin Inquiry) to defend their actions in that situation. Athletes may feel that since others are doing the same thing, they are "leveling the playing field" (Cowart, 1989).

### The emphasis on winning.

Much of the current literature about ethical problems associated with sport discusses winning and the problems that arise when winning is the only thing that matters (Arnold, 1989; Boudreau & Konzak, 1991; Eitzen, 1988; Lumpkin et al., 1994; Paddick, 1991; Ross, 1989; vanOosten, 1989; Volkwein, 1995). No committed athlete, whose passion, energy, and time are invested in a sport, will succumb easily to rhetoric that claims winning does not matter. Winning does matter; it is the immediate goal of every competitive game (Hyland, 1990). The ultimate purpose of competition is to win, but too often the doctrine of "winning is the only thing" means that the end justifies the means (Eitzen, 1988). "It is when winning is the sole purpose of sport that ethics and morality are cast aside" (Dubin, 1990, p. 511). For some athletes, the difference between winning and second place can mean millions of dollars in endorsements, public appearances, and sponsorships. Many of the ethical situations that exist in sport today are directly related to the overemphasis on winning. As the importance of winning increases, many athletes will use "any means at their disposal" to attain victory (Lumpkin et al., 1994).

### It's okay if you're not caught.

Athletes engage in illegal behaviours hoping they will not be caught. VanOosten (1989) stated that it is acceptable, even prudent, to use banned or illegal performance-enhancing substances if you do not get caught. Feezell (1988) wrote about specific examples of cheating and noted that there is intent to gain an unfair advantage and deception involved. Gaining an unfair advantage involves deception since you would not want your competitors to realize that you have altered conditions in order to put yourself at an advantage.

### The coach's influence.

For many coaches, just as for their athletes, winning is all important. Depending on the level of sport, the coach's success is based on two factors: winning and participant enjoyment (Gardner, 1995). At the higher levels, amateur sport (including collegiate athletics) is seen as big business and coaches are pressured by administrators to win or face the possibility of losing their jobs. "The coaches cautioned that much cheating and corruption can be traced to the intense pressures to win under which they labor" (Cullen, Latessa & Byrne, 1990, p. 61). With cutbacks in government funding to many sport programs, coaches and administrators are seeking corporate and private funding. One would assume that with the funding comes the pressure to win so that corporations see results from their investments. Coaches also face the pressure that "everyone else is doing it", but coaches must determine the appropriateness of a situation and react in the way that is in the best interest of their athletes. "Simply stated, young athletes model their coaches' behaviours and actions" (Kavanagh & Fall, 1995, p. 29). Stephens and Bredemeier (1996) found that the player's perception of their coach's goal orientation was a greater predictor of the athlete's temptation to play unfairly than their own goal orientation.

Some coaches mentally abuse their athletes under the guise of getting the most out of them. A few coaches have been known to teach their athletes to play unfairly (Wright, 1992) and to take drugs known to enhance performance (Lumpkin et al., 1994). A coach's attitude towards doping can have a lasting impact on an athlete's use of banned or illegal performance-enhancing substances. Coaches who condone drug use, and even provide the drugs for their athletes, have totally missed the boat on teaching values and ethics (Blackhurst et al., 1991).

Responsible coaches must recognize the power inherent in the position of coach (CPCA Coaching Code of Ethics, 1993) and recognize the influence they can have (both positive and negative) over their athletes. Burke (2001) refers to various forms of "manipulation" coaches employ that are directly related to the almost unquestioned authority apparent in many coach-athlete relationships. For some athletes, the coach becomes a substitute parent and in doing so becomes the "teacher" of many moral lessons based solely on how they act and react in sport situations (Gibbons, 1994).

To date, research on the athlete-coach relationship has been somewhat limited given the potential that exists for coaches to influence both the values and behaviours of athletes. Pocwardowski, Barott and Henschen (2002) stated that the relationship has three major components: (a) a technical component, (b) a social-psychological component, and (c) a spiritual component, and conclude that athletes change because of the influence of their coaches. Burke (2001) posited that the potential influence is based on coaches viewing their athletes as possessions and on athletes displaying loyalty and obedience without questioning the restrictions established by the coach. "The truth is, if you're a coach, you have authority over the players" (Clifford and Feezell, 1997, p. 75). They further explain that authority is the legitimate use of power over others. It is apparent that there is room for subjective evaluation in such a statement as to just what "legitimate" use would be. Laios et al., (2003) go on to dissect the concept of power and refer to "coercive" powers as those that could be used to punish or impose unpleasant consequences.

The approach a coach uses with one athlete may not be interpreted in the same way by another. Bower and Pelletier (2002) found that athletes interpret coaches' actions differently; therefore, effective coaching behaviour should vary as the characteristics of the athletes and the situation changes (Sherman, Fuller & Speed, 2000). Sherman et al go say their study supports earlier findings that female athletes have a greater preference for a participative style of coaching and coaches who demonstrate democratic behaviour. Although coaches are in direct contact with athletes on a day-to-day basis and are in an optimal position to teach and model appropriate values and ethics in sport, coaches receive minimal education in this area (Blackhurst et al., 1991.)



## Methods

The participants in this study were 91 varsity athletes (31 males and 60 females), representing three academic institutions in Atlantic Canada. They were members of varsity teams playing basketball and soccer (both males and females), hockey (males only) and volleyball (females only). Varsity athletes were chosen for investigation because they compete at a high level of sport and would have been exposed to the issues being investigated. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, a self-administered questionnaire was developed to collect data. The two questions under investigation were: what types of unethical decisions are most commonly faced by varsity athletes and what factors are most commonly used to justify engagement in unethical behaviours? To determine the variables, a review of literature was undertaken and information was collected from both undergraduate and graduate students studying physical education, most of whom were athletes, as well as from a group of community sport coaches and recreation leaders. The most common types of unethical behaviours identified through this process were: using performance-enhancing drugs, bending the rules, and using illegal equipment. In terms of justifications, the following four emerged: as long as you win, the means can be justified, as long as you do not get caught, if you believe that others do the same thing, or if your coach suggests it, then it is justified.

These responses were used to develop a data collection instrument. Using a seven-point scale, participants responded indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that certain conditions were justification for cheating in sport. More specifically, the statements on the questionnaire asked, "to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following justifications for unethical behaviour in sport: 'if you win', 'if you do not get caught', 'if others do the same thing', or 'if your coach suggests it'?" Next, the questions were each paired with the three common types of cheating (performance-enhancing drugs, bending the rules, and using illegal equipment). A fourth category, simply referred to as 'cheating', was added to capture other forms of unethical behaviour that may be sport specific. Athletes were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that each type of cheating was justifiable by each specific factor. The questionnaires were administered during meetings with each of the teams participating in the study.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate athlete justification for unethical behaviour in sport with particular emphasis on the role of the coach. The majority of participants did not agree with any of the justifications. However, as the results show, some athletes did agree with certain justifications including the coach suggesting that the athlete engage in specific forms of unethical behaviour.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine whether significant sex differences existed when comparing the statements on the questionnaire that relate to the four justifications for unethical behaviour. For those who did indicate some level of agreement with the justifications and types behaviours, Table 1 indicates that significant sex differences do exist at the .05 level for all four of the justifications.



**Table 1**

Kruskal-Wallis Test - Median Values and Significance Levels for Justifications for Unethical Behaviour by Sex

Justification	Male	Female	P
Coach suggests it	22	24	.029
Win	23	26	.005
Opponents doing the same	22	26	.007
Not Getting Caught	23	26	.006

Males generally reported stronger levels of agreement with these justifications for unethical behaviour. Females appeared most comfortable with cheating if the coach suggested it, in levels similar to the males.

However, the percentages of male participants in agreement with the justifications were consistently greater than the females for each of the justifications, and in fact, the highest level of agreement for females was 11% (for the justification of "opponents doing the same thing"). This percentage was lower than all four of the justifications with which the males agreed (see Table 2). The lowest reported level of overall agreement for males in any category was 12% and that was for the justification of "winning". In terms of "opponents doing the same thing", twice as many males as females indicated that this was justifiable with over 25% reporting some level of agreement.

**Table 2**

Percent of Participants Indicating Some Level of Agreement with the Justifications for and Types of Cheating by Total by Sex

Justification	Total (N=91)	Male (N=31)	Female (N=60)
Opponents doing the same	13%	26%	11%
Coach Suggests it	9%	14%	9%
Not Getting Caught	7.5%	14.5%	6%
Win	5.5%	12%	3.5%

The coach suggesting that an athlete engage in cheating was the third most frequently reported justification for males (14%), and was reported less frequently than believing that opponents were engaging in unethical behaviour (26%) or that it was justifiable as long as they did not get caught (14.5). For the females, the coach suggesting that the athlete engage in unethical behaviour was the second most frequently reported justification (9%) with opponents doing it being the most frequently reported justification (11%).

Table 3 reports the percentage of females and males who feel that each of the forms of behaviour is justified if the coach suggests it. For females, the results indicate that there are not strong levels of agreement for any form of unethical behaviour. The only result worthy of note is that there is slight agreement that bending the rules might be justifiable if the coach suggests it. For the others forms of cheating, the data suggest that female athletes feel that engagement cannot be justified even if their coach suggests that they do so.

**Table 3**

Levels of agreement that certain behaviours can be justified if the coach suggests it

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree Slightly	No Opinion	Disagree Slightly	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Females</b>							
Bend the rules	0	2%	28%	8%	5%	27%	30%
Illegal Equipment	0	0	2%	7%	7%	27%	58%
Cheating	0	0	2%	3%	10%	28%	57%
PE Drugs	0	0	2%	2%	3%	23%	70%
<b>Males</b>							
Bend the rules	13%	10%	10%	16%	10%	13%	26%
Illegal Equipment	3%	3%	0	13%	19%	16%	45%
Cheating	3%	3%	6%	13%	6%	22%	45%
PE Drugs	3%	0	3%	13%	16%	26%	39%

There were male athletes who strongly agreed that all forms of behaviour are justifiable as long as the coach suggests it. Similar to the females, the highest percentage reports agreement when the behaviour is bending the rules.

The influence of the coach is apparent in these data. More females agreed with bending the rules if the coach suggests it than any other of the combinations of justifications and types of unethical behaviour. Twelve per cent of males indicated that they could justify the use of performance-enhancing drugs if the coach were to suggest it, reinforcing the point that the coach can be very influential in the lives of the athletes they direct. It is interesting to note that the other justifications (others do same, not caught, and win) are all controlled by the athlete; that is, they decide whether the justification suits their individual needs. In the case of the coaching justification, the consequences perceived as being controlled by another indicate that blame or responsibility is shifted from the athlete to the coach. Perhaps the athlete has relinquished power, or perhaps the coach has assumed the power to decide what would be an appropriate outcome. The coach's power is clearly a factor in the relationship.

## Discussion and Conclusion

It is clear from these data that the majority of varsity athletes has an understanding of what is and what is not appropriate behaviour in sport and do not cross that line. However, some admit to crossing the line and feel they have justification for doing so. What is not clear is whether such athletes are consciously challenging moral standards or are under the assumption that doing so is acceptable practice within the culture of sport.

When one's motivation for being involved with sport, either as a coach or athlete, centers solely on winning, engagement in questionable behaviour sometimes occurs. When one side in a competition tilts the playing field to suit itself, for whatever reason and using whatever justification, the bottom line is that a level playing field no longer exists. Some will argue that for a myriad of reasons, a level playing field has never existed, be it because of the socio-economic status of the participants, genetic predisposition to certain abilities, or geographic location of their home and training area. The bottom line is that when athletes train to the best of their ability using whatever support is available to them, when they follow the rules that exist for their sport during competitions, they have the right to expect their competitors to have done the same and that the playing field is as level as possible in fairness to all.

As Morgan (2002) suggested, a degree of communicative action does exist in sport as most athletes play by the agreed-upon rules. Therefore, those who do not are acting in an unethical manner and are not so much leveling the field as tilting it to their advantage. This study looks not at the amount of unethical behaviour that occurs, but rather how athletes justify such acts, because until understanding of these justifications is realized, little can be done to lessen the amount of cheating that is taking place in sport today.

### Justifications for Unethical Behaviour

Although it was encouraging that the majority of athletes in this study felt that unethical behaviour in sport could not be justified, certain athletes were able to justify such behaviour under specific circumstances. The coaches' influence was the primary justification under investigation in this study. Although it was not the most frequently reported justification, there were athletes, particularly the males, who indicated a willingness to engage in all forms of unethical behaviour if the coach suggested it.

### The coach's influence.

As noted earlier, coaches are positioned to have a great deal of power and control over athletes. By the nature of the relationship, coaches are able to greatly influence the lives of high performance athletes. For some varsity athletes, their academic continuance depends upon their athletic success, making them even more reliant upon their coaches. In Western society, females are socialized as caregivers and often learn at an early age to place the needs of others before their own and to value the opinions of others, which frequently causes them to undervalue themselves. This leaves them particularly vulnerable to potential manipulation by those they perceive to hold power over them, including coaches.

It is perhaps surprising as well as encouraging that greater numbers of females in this study did not respond more positively to a coach suggesting certain behaviours. When females did bow to the requests of their coaches, it was generally on rule infractions. Males reported greater willingness to engage in unethical behaviours on the suggestion of their coaches, particularly with bending rules and using performance-enhancing drugs. Similar to the justification of others doing the same thing, certain male athletes seem willing to engage in very serious unethical behaviours that are clearly in violation of basic principles of fairness based upon the suggestions of their coaches.

What is not known from these data is the motivation for winning. At the present time, there certainly exists far greater opportunities for male athletes to continue to pursue high performance sport careers beyond the varsity level than is the case for females, making the stakes for winning much higher. Could this possibly explain the more frequent reporting of unethical behaviours being justified by males? If so, this should be a concern as high performance opportunities for females increase. A related issue to be considered is, that as high performance opportunities for women increase, so will the interest by males coaches to work with these athletes.

A recent study (Drewe, 2003) reported that male coaches apply a set of core beliefs to ethical issues based upon their own past experiences while female coaches treat ethical issues as situational, that is, by addressing the specific factors related to each particular ethical situation. The study reported that female coaches believe in giving athletes a high degree of autonomy in ethical decision making while male coaches expressed a desire to limit athlete's autonomy and exert greater control over athletes in this regard.

The Coaching Code of Ethics, published by the Canadian Professional Coaches' Association, acknowledges the power that is inherent in the position of coach and the related influence coaches have. Coaches have a vested interest in how their athletes perform; many times the win/loss record affects coaching status, from the lowest level of minor sport to the pros. Although they are role models and parental substitutes in many situations, coaches themselves justify their unethical instruction to athletes in a variety of ways.

Athletes choose the path they take depending on the desired outcome, and coaches do the same. With the influence the coach potentially has over the athletes, perhaps there is potential for coaches to use that power in a positive and nurturing way so that sport can be the vehicle for positive character development. No matter what the justification noted, whether it be the influence of the coach or the fact that if others are doing the same thing, then they somehow feel vindicated, it is imperative that coaches realize that athletes admit to justifications for unethical behaviour in sport.

### **If others are doing the same thing.**

This justification was cited by both males and females more frequently than any other, including winning. This seems to indicate that athletes may value fairness, yet are willing to act unfairly if they perceive that others are doing so. It is a cause for concern that a quarter of the male athletes and slightly more than 10 percent of the female athletes feel justified in engaging in unethical behaviour if others are doing so. Although athletes may perceive that engaging in unethical behaviours themselves because others are doing so is an issue of fairness and as such is justifiable, this attitude of an eye for an eye feeds the growth of unethical behaviour in sport. Athletes perceive that if their opponents are doing something unethical, they are simply "levelling the playing field" by doing the same thing. In this way, they can perhaps justify their actions in their own minds because what they are doing is not wrong, it is simply doing what someone else is doing, or, if everyone does the same thing, then no one has an unfair advantage.

Athletes do not want to be at a disadvantage, so if they perceive that their opponents are doing something to get ahead of them, they have to do the same things in order to be competitive. Athletes should be able to trust that the sport system functions in such a way that unethical behaviours that give certain participants an advantage are not tolerated. They will then not feel themselves "forced" to engage in unethical behaviours in order for competition to be "fair".

### Other justifications.

Although this paper focuses primarily on whether athletes justify unethical behaviour if their coach suggests they engage in such activity, other justifications were explored as well. Similar to the other justifications, males agreed more strongly and more frequently than females that it was alright to engage in unethical behaviours as long as you do not get caught. For the other forms of unethical behaviour, the greatest difference between the sexes was reported with the use of illegal equipment with no females feeling it could be justified. Ten per cent of the males indicated that they could justify using performance-enhancing drugs as long as they were not caught. This would seem to indicate that these particular athletes agree with the use of performance enhancing drugs.

Some athletes may justify unethical behaviour if they are not caught, feeling that they did not do anything wrong if officials did not detect their unethical behaviour. An athlete who illegally holds an opponent and does not get penalized is encouraged to attempt the same thing another time in hopes of once again not being caught. They perhaps feel that it is the responsibility of the officials to enforce the rules, not themselves.

A surprising finding was that winning was the least frequently reported justification for involvement in unethical behaviour, which perhaps suggests that for many athletes, the end does not justify the means. As was the case with all justifications, males more frequently reported agreement, but in fewer numbers. The gender differences in orientation toward winning supported the findings of Decker and Lasley (1995); Flood and Hellstedt (1991); and Lirgg, Dibrezzo, and Smith (1994), who report that males have a higher orientation toward winning, while females are more concerned with socialization and affiliation as priorities for involvement with sport. Much of the current literature states that the over-emphasis on winning is the major contributor to the unethical problems that exist in sport today, but similar findings are not realized with this study.

### Where do we go from here?

The results of this study indicated that many varsity athletes feel that unethical behaviour in sport is not justifiable in any way. However, the fact that a number of participants could justify various forms of unethical behaviour should be of concern to coaches and sport administrators.

With the apparent decay of ethical standards in many levels of sport, questions arise as to what can be done to help rectify the situation. The strong influence that coaches can, and often do, have over their athletes has already been noted. If, as Shogan (1988) suggested, officials can only police legal aspects of sport, the sport community needs to more clearly recognize the role of the coach as the moral compass for athletes, especially those who are amateurs.

A starting place might be to ensure that coaches have formal instruction in ethics in an attempt to expose them to opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas, and in turn, foster and encourage more ethically-based decisions. Through this ethical instruction, coaches could be encouraged to reflect upon moral issues and make their own rational judgments, which one hopes would translate into appropriate moral action. This deliberate and intentional activity is quite different from socialization where one hopes that life experiences "teach" the same sort of lessons. As suggested by Drewe (2003), although teaching by example is important in fostering respect within sport, direct teaching about what is and is not ethically appropriate is a role that coaches must assume if sport is to truly become a practice field for morally appropriate behaviour.

Morgan (2002) has identified the need for members of the sport community to discuss and reach agreement on how it wants sport to be played. Rather than being based upon abstract moral principles, ethics are based upon respect for a system of rules to which athletes and coaches subscribe. Ideally, such an agreement would be universal throughout sport, but in the absence of

such a move, coaches and leagues can initiate such action and seek agreement within their corner of the sport world.

As Shogan and Ford (2000) suggested, it may be time for a new sport ethic, one more inclusive in addressing the issues that are eroding the sport system today. If the systemic issues that cause certain athletes to feel the need to, and find justification for, taking it upon themselves to level the playing field can be addressed within the structure of sport itself, athletes can become more accountable for their actions. Similarly, with the assistance of ethicists, a system of communicative action suggested by Habermas (1990), where there is an adherent consensus as to how all those involved in sport are to conduct themselves, can be developed.

Finally, despite the myriad of factors that influence individual decision making, high performance athletes ultimately get to choose how they wish to engage in sport. Varsity athletes by definition are educated individuals who are experienced in sport, certainly experienced enough to be both legally and morally accountable for their actions. If excellence in sport is ever to be more than simply an ideal, athletes themselves must strive to discover ways to succeed within the existing rules rather than by circumventing them and be rewarded for doing so.

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