Distinguishing Conflict and Competition: A Model for Understanding Some Teaching Interactions in Athletics

Richard J . Nastasi

The issue of competition and athletics must be analyzed more closely by looking at ends and new models of sport

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The receiving of athletic instruction, by it's interaction processes, runs the gamut of positive and negative experience. How teachers, coaches, and administrators convey concepts to their constituencies will strongly effect the process and the product of athletic participation.

We are all competitive by nature. This statement invokes joy in some and fear in others. The basis for these beliefs are centered in the popular meaning that we give to the word "competition". Does this popular meaning coincide with the word's etymological derivation? In this paper the author would like to restate the derivative base of competition, offer an alternative group of words to perhaps replace the popular meaning of competition, and finally to offer a model to attempt a separation of two sporting concepts: competition and conflict. First, however, the author would like to describe several views of the term "competition".

Opinions of competition in sport have various definitions that satisfy a multitude of constituencies. Simon (1985) agrees with Delattre's (1975) assessment of competition as "a mutual quest for excellence through challenge." Martens (1978) views competition as a "social process whereby individuals or groups compare themselves with others using the same agreed upon criteria for evaluation." Therefore, Martens concludes, "competition is neither good or bad." Philosopher Nicholas Spykman (1966) relates Georg Simmels' view distinguishing competition from

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other forms of conflict. Simmel said that as "one gets rid of an adversary or damages him directly, one does not compete with them." In other words, to destroy your opponent is to eliminate the parallel paths that must be taken in order for competition to exist. Taking this tack a step further, Dewitt Parker (1931), in his essay on the value of play, affirms Shiller's contention that in play (meaning sport) "I should regard my opponents as my friends, as I do during the game, knowing there would be no zest to the game of life without them."

Even in the business world, there is a movement called the "new competition" (Best, 1990) in which corporations pool their resources in one or two areas so they might achieve victory (i.e. higher profits). As a result of this enterprise there are degrees of winning (and losing) but aspects of cooperation have been interwoven into the competitive process.

It is with the concept of competitor as friend that the author cites the writings of Kretchmar (1975) and Hyland (1978) who see competition in its original Latin derivation *competre* as the coming together of two constituencies to respectively, "bear witness together" and "question together." Both Kretchmar and Hyland's excellent discussions of the derivative meanings of competition yield an important question. If competition creates a positive synthesis between parties, why do some competitors still engage in anti-social behaviors before, during and after the contest on a regular basis?

It is the author's contention that competition is, by definition, inherently good. The true concern should be centered on the term "conflict". For the purpose of this paper the working term for conflict shall be "conflict based athletic interaction." The term conflict as applied in this paper should not be confused with the concept and application of "conflict theory" to sport. (Eitzen, 1987)

For many years most athletic coaches, players, parents, fans, as well as the general public accepted the term "competition" to mean a conflict involving two sides resulting in a winner and a loser. As Hyland and Kretchmar point out, the word "competition" has no derivative association to the word "conflict". The word "conflict" derives from the Latin term *confligere*, which means to strike together. It might seem that the negative onslaught associated with the term "competition" is really a cry against conflict based athletic interaction. Alfie Kohn (1988) suggests that

" . . . we sometimes assume that the working toward a goal and setting standards for oneself can take place only if we compete against each other. This is simply false. Once can both accomplish a task and measure one's progress in the absence of competition."

While the author would agree with Kohn's assessment of the popular interpretation of competition, I would prefer to replace "competition" in his statement with the term "conflict based athletic interaction". Competition has its roots in the act of working with others to achieve ones goals. According to Kohn, cooperation is based on collective performance. Is it not true that the most aesthetically pleasing competitions are the ones where great synthesis occurs and the product that is born is "high sport." A 59-0 drubbing as well as one student forgetting their part in a school play reflect a failure of synthesis. The result is a lack of competitive satisfaction and the contest (or production) is not totally complete. Participants in sport who revel in the rout are displaying conflict based athletic interaction. This is the mind set that the author believes to be "inherently undesirable" and that healthy conflict based athletic interaction is actually a contradiction in terms.

To illustrate the contentions presented in this paper,

the author will put forth a model that will attempt to reveal the dichotomous relationship between coaching and teaching in the competitive mode and the conflict based athletic interactive mode (see figure 1). In the following sections, the author will attempt to explain the progression of the model as well as its cyclical nature.

Competition Based Athletic Interaction

The competition component of the model forms its pattern in the belief that a benevolent feeling toward all participants in an athletic contest can be achieved even when the objective is one side's higher athletic achievement for that particular contest.

To begin with, teachers/coaches must introduce three basic concepts to the long and short range strategies of the participants (including the team, parents and supporters) involved in the contest. First, it should be emphasized that the sporting event is taking place because both constituencies have something (namely their athletic prowess) to share. If the opposition had chosen not to show up for the contest, the result would be less satisfying.

The second issue that the competitive component addresses is the realization that everyone is responsible for the good conduct of the event. In order for a sporting event to be in the competitive mode all of the athletic constituencies must be aware of the synthesis of the event. Thus, the fans as well as the parents, coaches, and players need to be sensitive to the concept of an honorable contest. The reader can look to Lowe's (1977) writing on symbolic communication to see how the concept of athletic honor permeates ancient Greek sport.

> "Hercules cannot win glory through his strength without deference to a code of honor. . . . (Honorable acts) are not merely unbridled expressions of force . . (this type of force) in Homer's time was differentiated as violence and denigrated as an asocial or immoral act."

Finally, the competitive contest must be athletically intrinsic to all concerned. Participants must derive pleasure via the decency of the event. There cannot be satisfaction in a concept such as revenge since the participants would be sacrificing their locus of control and putting in place a hatred of the opposition that can never be truly satisfied. This overt and covert hatred might be the true villain of athletics as they are used (and abused) today.

What will this orientation to the concept of competre yield in the actual contest situation? It is hoped that two things will emerge. One, a unification in the competitive act will take place. Pepitone (1980) states that "By virtue of their required interaction, competitors have . . . control over each other, [and] are also more dependent on each other." A resultant synthesis will then take place. This does not mean that there will be a "love-in" after every basket, but it does suggest that respect will be at a high level and incidents that tend to compromise respect (such as, but not limited to, gratuitous violence, cheating and fan disorder) will diminish.

The second result would be to put the contestant into a positive mode for Festinger's (1954) concept of social comparison. The contestant might be better able to determine the relative progress of the opponent without some of the extrinsic baggage that is attached. Baron and Byrne (1981), in discussing social comparison, corroborate Festinger by pointing out that " . . . competition might stem from a source we might not first expect: our desire to gain fuller and more valid knowledge of ourselves."

When the athletic contest is over, what benefit will the competition based athletic interaction yield? First and foremost, it will provide a mind set for all participants to feel respect for the opposition. This feeling should be pervasive in defeat as well as victory. Secondly, by focusing on the game

itself and not on extraneous variables (such as hating your opponent), contestants can concentrate on improving their athletic skills for subsequent encounters. These realizations will improve post game evaluations and make a natural and positive cyclical transition to the top of the model. Players, coaches, parents, and fans will have little need or concern for non-related attributes such as fan degradation and player taunting.

Model for Conflict / Competition in Coaching and Teaching Athletics and Physical Education
(Applicable to Teachers, Coaches, and Parents)
(Third Draft)   (Nastasi, 1991)
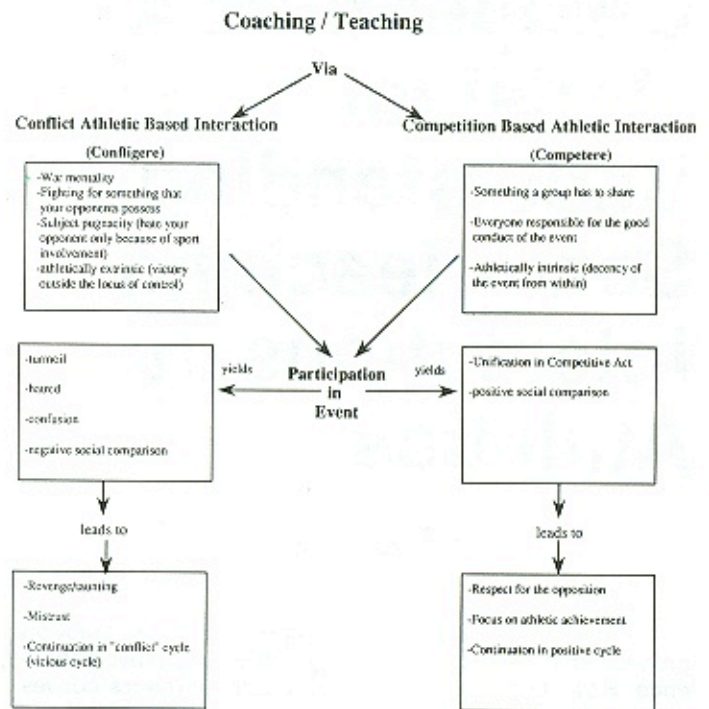
Conflict Based Athletic Interaction

Many coaches look at the preparation, participation, and evaluation of a game as a battle situation, with the opposition being an entity that must be destroyed. Slogans such as "when they are drowning, throw them an anchor" demonstrate the breaking away of true competitive ideals.

A major sign of Conflict Based Athletic Interaction is a war mentality. With this type of orientation several issues will arise. Firstly, the combatants are fighting for something that the opposition possesses. This can be a material item like an annual trophy or a concept such as "bragging rights." Many coaches ascribe to this concept, motivating athletes (as well as parents and fans) to strive for these external rewards promising the glory of extrinsic acquisition rather than the satisfaction of simply a job well done.

Conflict Based Athletic Interaction also promotes "subject pugnacity" (Simmel, 1950). When coaches tell their charges to go out and kill the opposition, and players remind themselves to "win by as many points as possible" (Snyder, 1972) we can see a hatred and callousness that is disturbing. The constituencies of the game are taught that sport is ruled by *homo homini lupus*, that man is wolf to man.

The fourth process that could be manifested in the Conflict Based Athletic Interaction is that victory might be taken away from a contending team because of outside in-

fluences. The bad calls of a referee, cheating by the opponent, or the unsuitable conditions of the playing field, might be the consistent ways for a conflict based coach, fan, or player to explain defeat. If there is no respect for the opposition, how can a team justify losing based on athletic merits? When you see a message on a locker room wall proclaiming, "If you did your best, you won" (Snyder, 1972) there is not much room for the opponent's input into the equation.

What differences will the conflict side of the model yield during the game situation? There will be turmoil and confusion among the constituencies. The author believes, in contrast to Simmel, that people would lean to the competitive rather than the conflict side of the model. As a result of this persuasion, competitors might react aggressively not solely because they were told to, but because they are manifesting their own frustrations by having to play the part of the wolf.

No matter what orientation one ascribes to, the element of hatred perpetuated by the conflict based model and propagated against the opposition will produce negative social comparison. Win or lose, this is not a healthy result for any of the constituencies of the contest.

After the game, the people in the conflict based side of the model would seek athletic revenge and might engage in taunting and name calling. The mistrust that participants would feel would render the shaking of hands after the match relatively meaningless. In this mode, the natural next step will be to return to the beginning of the conflict cycle and prepare for the "enemy" again. It must be emphasized again that this interaction is not only a player/coach model. Athletic conflict is also prevalent among parents, fans and spectators.

Discussion

The conflict mode of athletic interaction can be seen in the sport world on a consistent basis.

Some violence in sporting crowds can be traced to the frustration that conflict based athletic interaction yields. Research involving critical incidents as determinants in crowd violence have been well documented. (Cheffers, 1988; Cheffers, Hawkins, Rhodes, and Prosser, 1990; and Goodman, 1989) Verbal and non-verbal violence are heightened when the sport is relegated to conflict interaction.

When the Cincinnati Reds defeated the Boston Red Sox in game six of the 1975 world series the Boston police had little trouble after the game. As one Red Sox fan said "We were in a state of shock, but it was more than that. Nobody lost the game. The Reds just won it more." This was not the case when the Detroit Pistons won their first National Basketball Association championship in 1989. The "celebration" after the game had turned into violent assault on the city of Detroit. Eight people were killed, 26 were treated for gun shop wounds and 99 were treated for maladies ranging from knife wounds to baseball bat bruises. William Oscar Johnson (1991) of Sports Illustrated called the proceedings "sports-associated mayhem" and "utterly pointless." The chief investigator for the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office tried to play down the effect of the game on the violence by saying "Death is an ambiguous thing. Who can say those people wouldn't have died anyway? When your time is up, your time is up." This is a difficult assessment to accept. It is the author's belief that the adversarial hype that surrounded the Pistons (being heralded as "the nasty boys") had something to do with the reaction of the several hundred people in Detroit and its suburbs that night. Detroit mayor Coleman Young cited the media as being partially responsible for the hype involving the Pistons' reputation and therefore contributing to the atmosphere of the post-game events.

During the 1990 World Cup in Italy, the London Daily Star employed the self proclaimed "greatest hooligan in the world" as a soccer corespondent. This person had to sneak into Italy since his passport had been revoked "because of his 40 convictions for soccer fan violence." (Telander, 1990). One of his reports told of his plans to meet the Dutch team and supporters and "give them a right good kicking." Thankfully, he was arrested and deported soon after his literary career had started.

These examples of fan related conflict based athletic interaction show the war mentality and the subject pugnacity that are inherent with this type of orientation. The Red Sox fan who spoke of Cincinnati winning the game "more" touched upon one of the aspects of the competition side of the model. There was unification in the competitive act.

There were examples of conflict and competition interaction involving players and coaches which clearly illustrate the dynamics of both sides of the model. Magic Johnson and Isaiah Thomas embracing before the start of the National Basketball Championships in 1989 was a testament to the respect the two players shared for each other. There was no sacrifice in their desire to win the title, yet there was a synthesis which produced a competitive honor between them. When Jack Parker, head coach of Boston University's hockey team told his team that he was proud of their effort and desire in their heartbreaking 8–7 overtime loss to Northern Michigan in the 1991 collegiate finals, he was a competitive coach. He left the door open for improvement, but saluted the valiant effort. According to the model presented in this paper, these players probably will have a greater chance of putting their season in proper perspective and move on to the next challenge relatively unscathed.

In conclusion, the role of true competition in society is to maintain the moral initiative for athletic constituencies to strive for excellence. The critics of "competition" have given compelling testimony to the evils of an association which can best be described as "conflicted based athletic interaction."

Competition as a moral ideal has emanated from our Greek and Roman predecessors. It should be recognized as an important component of a person's life. What a pity it would be to compare the competitor Hercules with the hooligan who mocks sport and its rich traditions.

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