Ethical Decision-Making Standards of Collegiate Athletes

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Discussions of ethics in sports include, but are not limited to, racial and sexual discrimination, aggression and violence, gambling and bribes, and unsportsmanlike conduct of participants (e.g., athletes, coaches, administrators, fans).

At the professional level, winning is the primary goal. The pursuit of excellence requires years of practice and other sacrifices that, for some athletes, a little "supplemental help" seems appealing, especially when the risk of being caught was zero (Haugen, 2004).

The win-at-all-cost notion should not be the most important lesson because other benefits such as physical, cognitive and social development, character building, and life lessons can be obtained through sports (Barnett & Weber, 2008; Conn & Gerdes, 1998; Rudd, 2005).

Sandlin, Keathley and Sandline (2013) conducted an ethical decision-making survey with formal high school athletes and found (a) females had higher ethical standards than males and (b) professional level athletes had lowest ethical standards, followed by collegiate ones.

Further investigation on athletes' moral values is needed so that experts in the sport ethics field can precisely target the problems and implement appropriate education. The purpose of the study was to examine (a) the ethical decision-making standards of collegiate athletes and (b) who influenced them to make such decisions while participating in sports.

PARTICIPANTS

Team	Gender Female	Gender Male	Age 18-20	Age 21-23	Fr.	So.	Jr.	Sr.
Baseball	-	33	18	15	13	2	11	7
Men's Basketball	-	12	5	7	2	3	2	5
Women's Basketball	13	-	5	8	2	3	4	4
Bowling	5	-	4	1	3	-	1	1
Football	-	50	30	20	14	12	14	10
Golf	-	10	8	2	3	4	-	2
Soccer	25	-	23	2	16	7	1	1
Softball	18	-	14	4	6	5	3	3
Tennis	7	-	6	1	2	4	-	1
Cross Country/Track	21	16	25	13	8	8	15	7
Volleyball	12	-	10	2	4	4	3	1
Total (Percentage)	101 (45.1%)	121 (54%)	148 (66.1%)	75 (33.5%)	73 (32.6%)	52 (23.2%)	54 (24.1%)	42 (18.8%)

Note. Fr. = Freshman; So. = Sophomore; Jr. = Junior; Sr. = Senior.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Sports Decision Marking Survey: 15 sport-related scenarios and one question on identifying which individual(s) influenced their decision-making standards in sports.

	Clearly Ethical (1)	Somewhat Ethical (2)	Somewhat Unethical (3)	Clearly Unethical (4)
In a basketball game, the coach tells her team to be as physical as they can and get away with it. (1)	○	○	○	○
In football, a lineman deliberately seeks to inflict pain on an opposing player to intimidate him. (2)	○	○	○	○
In tennis, the ball is called out though the player is certain it hit the line. The player says nothing and takes the point. (3)	○	○	○	○
In an attempt to motivate his team, a coach deliberately yells at the official to get thrown out.	○	○	○	○

*Sample survey questions

Independent-samples t-tests were run between two groups by gender and category (i.e., team vs. individual sports). One-way ANOVAs were run between and within multiple groups by age, ethnicity, classification, and teams.

RESULTS

Table 1 Independent-samples *t* tests by gender and category

	M	SD	t	df	p Value
Gender					
Female	42.48	7.831	5.730	220	.000
Male	36.61	7.388			
Category					
Team Sports	38.36	7.668	3.074	222	.002
Individual Sports	42.05	8.850			

Table 2 One-way ANOVAs by teams

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Baseball	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Men's Basketball	.992		–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Women's Basketball	.996			–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Bowling	.970	.752	1		–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Football	1	.985	.996	.969	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Golf	.976	.718	1	1	.974	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Soccer	.231	.092	.990	1	.157	1	–	–	–	–	–
8. Softball	.925	.552	1	1	.906	1	.999	–	–	–	–
9. Tennis	.161	.055	.774	.997	.139	.930	.991	.857	–	–	–
10. Track/Cross Country	.075	.040	.969	1	.033	.999	1	.993	.993	–	–
11. Volleyball	.015	.006	.472	.988	.010	.775	.924	.566	1	.927	–

Table 3 Descriptive by teams

	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Baseball	33	36.45	7.268	23	54
Men's Basketball	12	33.67	7.127	23	47
Women's Basketball	13	38.92	7.858	28	50
Bowling	5	41.20	9.783	26	52
Football	50	36.54	7.882	20	58
Golf	10	39.90	4.332	33	49
Soccer	25	41.84	5.320	32	55
Softball	18	39.78	6.882	25	51
Tennis	7	45.43	7.091	39	60
Track/Cross Country	39	42.10	9.888	25	60
Volleyball	12	45.83	6.351	29	52

Significant differences were found between/within groups by gender, category, and team.

No significant differences were found by age, ethnicity, or classification. In the sample of the present study, the 20-year-old athletes had the highest score (M = 40.71, SD = 8.538) and the 23-year-olds had the lowest (M = 32.60, SD = 9.529). The Hispanic athletes reported the highest score (M = 43.78, SD = 9.935) and the Caucasians reported the lowest (M = 39.11, SD = 6.956). The sophomores scored the highest (M = 40.17, SD = 7.031) and the seniors scored the lowest (M = 38.07, SD = 8.449).

As for individuals who influenced them to make such decisions: family members (53.7%) were reported the most frequently, followed by professional athletes (19.6%), coaches (17.8%), and others (8.9%). A small amount of them mentioned teammates, friends, themselves, and God. Among family members, parents were indicated 102 out of 115 times (88.7%), followed by six grandparents, four siblings, one uncle and one cousin. Interestingly, there were 28 professional athletes specified by the participants with Drew Brees, LeBron James, Michael Jordan, Sanya Richards-Ross and Tim Tebow being mentioned more than once.

CONCLUSIONS

The female athletes in the present student reported higher ethical decision-making scores than their male counterparts, which is in congruence with the findings of Sandlin and her colleagues (2013). The bowlers, golfers, tennis players, and track/cross country athletes in the sample had higher ethical standards than those who were in team sports. When comparing the means by teams, volleyball players illustrated higher ethical scores than the football, baseball, and men's basketball players. Track/cross country athletes also demonstrated higher ethical scores than the football and men's basketball players. No statistical significance was found when calculating means by age, ethnicity, and classification.

Unlike what Sandlin and her colleagues (2013) found in their study, coaches had less ethical decision-making influence on the athletes in the present study than family members did. Data also revealed that professional athletes and coaches had a similar amount of influence, which, unlike previous research (Sandlin et al., 2013), was not as strong as their family members.

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