What Should We Expect From Sports?

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This article presents a debate on the usefulness of sports. Contemporary research emphasized the significance of physical activity in health and especially in cardiological matters. More recent findings appear to justify the aroused enthusiasm as an exaggeration. Nevertheless, sports are enjoyable *per se*. They release mental stress by providing delight; they direct more conscious and organized life habits; and they boost the practicer's morale. Many people are involved with sports passively as sheer spectators.

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Introduction

The origin of the word "sport" is based on the parts "dis" and "portare" and means to be away from work. In other words, sports represent delight, not heavy labor. The difference between play and work is based upon the difference in attitude, which represents pleasure in experiencing the former. Mere result does not count much. Nevertheless, satisfactory results contribute to the pleasure obtained in a game (Özbaydar, 1883, p. 30).

Many sport-freaks attribute a lot of importance to physical activities, glorifying the innumerable benefits involved. For them, sports are useful and one should regularly engage in sports in a harsh, unyielding discipline, if one is to acquire the useful results. They do not even consider the psychological stress of keeping up with this tedious routine as if it were a simultaneous job requiring similar attendance.

Some are clever enough to advocate making the sports into one's life like walking instead of taking a bus or climbing instead of taking the elevator. They are at least well aware of the stressful time spent on an artificial electrical walking band.

Indeed, a holiday is a good experience just because it breaks the routine. As London (1978, p. 498) put it, the sweet people you meet at the mountain top on a holiday are very boring types back home. They look nice, because they are on holiday. Holidays provide the opportunity to get isolated from responsible dignified roles and enjoy games.

The coping mechanism of regression hinted above could at times be a good shelter. A psychology instructor the researcher met in Illinois years ago said that he evaluates his service days in Vietnam as a plain combat soldier as a socially accepted regression, at a time when he crammed his head with thick textbooks and demanding term papers. The military interruption came out as a rejuvenation of his head, he explained.

Pleasure vs. Benefits

Way back years ago, the researcher had encountered an article in *Newsweek*, whose author did not attach to the researcher's memory. But the title did, "Sports: Help or Hazard?" It was basically about the adverse

effects of sports on health. It was quite a striking topic. At the times, sports were being defended and glorified as health promoting activities.

Jogging was especially popular. People kept jogging around in cities, some as the entire families. But a few “devil’s advocates” were debating the damage directed against knee-joints, ankle-joints, and leg muscles due to effort spending on hard ground.

Boxer Mohammed Ali Clay’s manager once told the journalists that the champion’s urine resembles tomato paste. Years of trauma targeted his kidneys and caused considerable ruin. Clay would develop Parkinson’s disease at a later time.

It is pretty obvious that sports like gymnastic, wrestling, or football could easily lead to injuries of all sorts. Should sports bring about benefits, after all?

For a physician like me, it is a temptation to claim strong, positive, and clear associations between health and sports or similar physical leisure. But, no! Sports, first of all, bring about their own self-actualization. Sports, above all, constitute a natural, satisfying, and nice way of expressing oneself. A playless world where the impulsion to run, jump, throw things, swim, or dance is absent is unthinkable. Do those people who advocate music, painting, or literature necessarily associate them with building human health? They just find those activities precious and interesting. I think that we should consider sportive activities in a similar context. (Bannister, 1975, p. 2)

“Studies attempting to correlate physical activity to death rate almost exclusively concentrated on heart diseases. None even proposed a correlation between physical activity and other major death causes like cancer or traffic accidents” (Solomon, 1985, p. 78). Solomon (1985, pp. 79-85) further asserted that it all started in 1953 by a research conducted by Jeremy Morris inquiring into cardiologic health situations of London City bus drivers and ticket-givers. The drivers underwent little motion while the ticket-givers, who also acted as ushers for passengers, were moving about abundantly. The latter proved to be healthier than the former. Based on this incentive, in the 1960s, medicine started the race of verifying the benefits of sports for heart. Now, Morris himself was to confess a big fault of his first research just three years later, in 1956. The former histories and conditions of the two parties were different at the moment of their recruitment, to begin with, a fact which explains their demands for the vacancies. The ticket-givers were of smaller stature and thin. The drivers were big and heavy, already suggesting their high blood pressure and high cholesterol concentrations.

As people take note of what appeals to them, sports were applauded as a savor, faced with the fear of heart failure. Masses started doing sports. Jogging campaigns started just on those days. Turgay Renklikurt, a prominent authority in sports as an instructor of gym teacher candidates, gave a conference on this topic in 1976, stressing the significance of mass sports. He depicted the akinetic life of the office man. He said that thanks to those new campaigns, sports were freed from the bigotry of certain cliques and became accessible to everyone. He quoted an American congressman’s complaints about raising gladiators (Olympic champions) while the typical American child suffers musculatory deficiency from spending hours in front of the TV set. He said that some Nordic European distribute certain rosettes to those citizens who simply declare having run or walked so many kilometers.

Harassment Targeting the Amateur Sportsman

Even though sports are less of an prerogative with respect to former times, it is still regarded with envy as a privilege of some but not all. This envy or hostility may at times lead to overt harassment of some sort.

Solomon (1985, p. 157, with reference to Kaplan et al., 1982) reported that in Atlanta, a yearly running event is organized on July 4: Peachtree Road Race. He went on to say that according to the information

collected from the 1980 participants, more than 100 runners got exposed to objects thrown by unidentified persons, such as tin cans, bottles, glass pieces, water squirts, and even a bag full of pebbles!

In the researcher's undergraduate days in Bosphorous University, it became a fashion to go running along the coastal road at night time. It was more practical because it did not interfere with other academic activities. The most important issue was to convince at least one more classmate to come along. It was inconvenient to run alone. People in passing-by cars were demoralizing you with their booing cheers. One student said that they threw banana peels at him.

Once, a couple of students were departing towards the finish near Aşıyan cemetery, when a passing-by car's driver blew a whistle, a uniformed night watchman ahead of them moved to his official gun and they came to an immediate halt. The watchman realized the situation and he got so furious at that whistle-blower that he sent a mouthful of swearing words after that anonymous rascal.

It goes without saying that females engaged in early morning walks or runs could be victims of even more insistent harassing reactions.

There Are Benefits, as Well

When it comes to health issues, maybe it is safer to claim that sports promote health at least indirectly in the sense that people conscious of physical activity do care for their physical being without falling into neglect. They arrange their eating, drinking, and sleeping habit in a planned, regular manner.

The following case history is interesting. Some years ago, on a hot summer day, the researcher was choosing some small articles from a pedlar's stand in Ankara, just nearby the Mosque of Hadgibayram. A buffet-cabin was nearby. A hollow-cheeked middle-aged man walked there and asked for a bottle of beer. Even though the customer meant to drink it on the spot, the buffet-owner first wrapped the bottle in a newspaper sheet (obviously due to the location, a very religious quartier).

While the man began to take sips at his mildly alcoholic beverage, a tall adolescent with a sport-bag on his back approached. He asked for a bottle of milk and began to drink with great appetite, quenching his thirst. The beer-drinker began to contemplate the milk-drinker with an obvious expression of jealousy. Making a grimace, he gave a disdaining look to the wrapped beer-bottle as if comparing this lowly drink with the noble milk in the hand of the young sportsman. Then, with a resignation, he stooped back to taking his sips again. Meanwhile, the adolescent emptied the bottle and went away, with the glance of the drunkard now pivoted on his back. The researcher watched all that seemingly-unimportant scenes, probably with a covered smile on lips. As a scholar of sociology, quite an observation it was!

Moreover, a person who has dealt with sports must have acquired a lot of intangible gains like self-confidence and recognition of the limits of one's capabilities. After all, perspiration is a good additive in the formation of a good character. It is the principle of some American colleges during the acceptance process to confirm that the freshman candidate is willing to do some manual work.

It should be pointed out that having partners in doing sports provides a good company of comradeship which is usually more durable than friendship in other circumstances. One remembers his former sport partners more vividly than the other classmates even after years.

As a dialectic way of thinking, which also has a touch of the oriental Yin-Yang philosophy, everything is meaningful thanks to its polar opposite. A rest pause is so precious when one is stricken with fatigue that one appreciates it much more. Even a period of sickness may come as a becoming experience.

The researcher remembers an interview of a journalist with Boxer Mohammed Ali Clay, way back years ago. He was recovering from a bone fracture ("Norton is a good kid. But he broke my jaw," he said to the reporter). Clay specified that for the first time in his boxer life, in his convalescence period, he can devote more time to his wife and children (He had six daughters and no son. When the last number got born, he declared with a laugh that a manly man has a manly son-in-law, making an allusion to the archaic macho-proverb that a manly-man begets sons).

The accomplishment of an ordeal makes a man a real man. It is like an initiation (rite de passage of former times). Marathon runner Ismail Akçay placed fourth in Mexico Olympic games in 1968. He later said that due to a cramp in his foot, he had run the last kilometers in real pain. In a matter of two hours and some minutes, the man lost about 15 pounds. What an experience! How happy is a man who can go through such an ordeal!

Four athletes ahead of Ismail, the champion was an Ethiopian athlete, Mamo Wolde, a corporal in the army (Ethiopians make good long distance runners. The legendary Abebe Bikila was the former champion. He used to run barefooted). Their emperor Haile Selassie was watching the race from the honor guests' lodge. He issued an oral order to his court: "Promote Mamo to the rank of sergeant!" (It was a tangible initiation reward for the Olympic champion).

Girls or boys who are good at sports enjoy high prestige among peers in the neighborhood or in school. Isn't that something? It gives a boost to the personal morale, prevents depression-arousing tendencies, and contributes to the shaping of a self-satisfied, balanced personality for the adulthood.

The following case history is revealing. Many years ago, Robert College arranged a wrestling championship with Middle East Technical University (METU) in the big gymnasium. Two undergraduate wrestling fans, Ekrem and Alâaddin, provincial youths with Anatolian accents, instigated the event and a team got improvised, some weights being filled by students from the *Lycée* division, Robert Academy. METU displayed a wonderful team depth and the result was a general disaster for the college. Though good at volleyball, basketball, and athletic branches (the college used to have an annual field day), wrestling was not the college's cup of coffee! Sports reflect socio-cultural structures (see Appendices A and B).

One wrestler from the METU team, as inferred from the cheers of the visitor-side, was Mustafa. He had huge biceps and forearm muscles, the mere sight of which openly demoralized his opponent, Apostol from Mersin. The college could gain a third medal besides those of Ekrem and Alâaddin, thanks to the *Lycée*'s contribution. Ahmet, a peasant boy from Serik-Antalya, crushed his rival on the mattress and grabbed the cup (Stout and firmly built, he was also good at gymnastics)! He was a few years older than what his birth certificate indicated and was given the nickname "Asker" (soldier), because he looked like a conscript among other adolescents. The gymnasium echoed with the cheers "Asker! Asker!" and a spectator, a janitor from the College Engineering Building, took him as a real soldier. On that day, the village boy saved the face of his school along with his personal victory. He became the hero!

Finally, one can count the benefits of being a mere watcher of sportive activities. Many people's participation in sports is a vicarious one as being part of the spectators, instead of taking place actively. Even a billiard match is placed by two persons and followed by many, around the table.

Many discontented people within the society take the rival team as a scapegoat in soccer matches and cheer against the opponents. Most of them do it deliberately. It is not a subconscious discharge of some sort. Many of them openly confess that this is a respite for them, which provides an outlet for their accumulated aggressive feelings. This is a displacement, another one of the common defense or coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

Sports' contribution to health seems to be an exaggeration, based on the common fear of heart problems. Sports are not less valuable, now that this overestimation becomes more clarified. They provide mental comfort by decreasing daily stress. They compell a more disciplined life style. They add to personal prestige and charisma. They attract spectators, who enjoy watching exciting matches.

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Appendix A: Famous Ottoman Oil-Wrestler

Figure 1. Former oil-wrestler and later dry-mat-wrestler in America, Koca Yusuf, was world-famous. He got drowned in 1898 during the return trip by ship. This life-size cardboard-cut-off of the wrestler is in the Wrestlers' Museum in Edirne (Photo by the author—Sinan Çaya). Oil wrestlers are like the idols of provincial people in Turkey. Until a few decades, readers used to follow their adventures given in serial by some conservative newspapers.

Appendix B: Famous Republican Era Wrestler

Figure 2. Late retired teacher Makbule Hanım (The author's beloved mother) next to the in-relief-bust of Wrestler-Hüseyin from Tekirdağ, at the Wrestlers' Museum in Edirne. This wrestler had a white complexion and a proportional body structure. He was very handsome in facial appearance. Besides oil wrestling, he was also good at dry free-style wrestling, which endeared him to city people, as well as to peasantry. In 1940, he competed with an Abyssinian opponent on the mattress and beat him. The game was arranged in Lüleburgaz during the animal fair festivities. My grandfather, the namesake of the champion, took his eight-year-old daughter, my future mother, to watch the match. She cheered for her hero like the other spectators until she got a hoarse voice. It was an unforgettable day for the little girl (Photo by the author—Sinan Çaya).