

## How do Graduate Students' Perceptions of Gamesmanship Change when exposed to a Sport Ethics Course?

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*An important responsibility of coaches is teaching their athletes to make appropriate ethical decisions. One aspect of ethical decision-making involves gamesmanship. Making appropriate gamesmanship decisions is often influenced by the importance of winning. Coaches and athletes recognize what is appropriate but have a difficult time acting appropriately when winning and losing are on the line. This study used a pre-class post-class gamesmanship inventory to determine if an ethics course had an impact on the gamesmanship beliefs of graduate students enrolled in a leadership-focused master's degree program. It was noted that a shift in gamesmanship beliefs occurred as a result of the sport ethics course.*

**Keywords:** *gamesmanship, ethics, morals, coaches, education*

### Introduction

Gamesmanship as a concept is difficult to understand. As defined, it is the “art or practice of winning games by questionable means without actually breaking the game’s rules, but violating the spirit” and “the use of ethically dubious methods to gain an objective” (Gamesmanship). The challenge for many coaches is they are judged on winning percentages while being expected by many to win fairly (Mata and Gomes 2013). The pressures put upon coaches to win can easily lead to the questionable practice of gamesmanship (Yukhymenko-Lescroart 2015).

In a sense, sportsmanship, gamesmanship, breaking the rules, and cheating exist on a continuum. It is well understood that sportsmanship is a set of moral qualities with a code of specialized behavior (Keating 1964), including traits such as truthfulness, honor, courage, respect, and fairness (Hanson and Savage 2012). On the other end of the continuum lies rule-breaking and cheating. Cheating involves breaking the rules of the game without getting caught (Daugherty 2016). Somewhere in the middle is gamesmanship which is a fine line between sportsmanship and rule-breaking/cheating. As mentioned in the first paragraph, gamesmanship is not cheating, but it certainly pushes the boundaries of the rules to gain an advantage or edge over opponents.

Because gamesmanship is not illegal, many players engage in it and many coaches teach and foster it (Strand et al. 2018). From an early age, athletes closely watch the actions of their coaches and treat what their coaches say as gospel

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(Becker 2009). Additionally, both players and coaches watch other players and coaches win, while engaging in gamesmanship and it simply becomes an accepted norm in sports.

This study aimed to determine if a graduate course in sport ethics could lead to changes in the gamesmanship beliefs of students enrolled in the course.

## Methods

Data for this study were gathered from two separate classes of a graduate course titled Ethical Leadership taught during different years. The course was offered in a graduate program titled Leadership in Physical Education and Sport.

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were 42 (m=33, f=9) graduate students enrolled in a graduate program in a Midwestern state in the United States. Class 1 was comprised of 25 students (m=20, f=5) while class 2 had 17 students (m=13, f=4). The students were all graduate students with some being high school teachers and coaches, some university graduate assistants, and some fifth-year super seniors enrolled in the graduate program. No other specific demographic data were collected on the questionnaire.

### *Instructors and Class Format*

The instructor of class 1 was a 60+-year-old male, a full professor, with over 40 years of teaching experience. He had been both a high school and college coach. Class 1 was offered online with structured weekly readings and assignments during a fall semester. The semester was 16 weeks in length. Once every two weeks students attended real-time online class sessions using Blackboard Collaborate. The book used for this class was titled *Sport ethics: Applications for fair play* (Lumpkin et al. 2003) with additional readings coming from *Sport ethics: Concepts and cases in sport and recreation* (Mallay et al. 2003). Specific topics discussed in class 1 included: 1) your values and principles, 2) application and strategy, 3) intimidation, competition, and violence, 4) eligibility and sport elimination, 5) commercialized sport, 6) racial and gender equity, 7) racial and gender equity and 8) ergogenic aids.

One of the main assignments in course 1 was for students to write relevance reports on a bi-weekly basis. Relevance reports were an account of a current sporting event from some media report (TV, sports magazine, newspaper) that related to the chapter topic. The one-page reports included a concise statement of the exact moral issue involved; a supportive and critical interpretation of this event in light of sports ethics, and/or the philosophy of sport; and, one's observation of the event. The culminating activity in course 1 was for each student to prepare and record a video presentation that was shared with all students. Instructions for this activity were as follows: You will develop a video presentation of your philosophy

of coaching/teaching/leadership in terms of positions relative to various ethical dilemmas and issues typically encountered in today's coaching profession. With this presentation, you will identify what you consider three of the most pressing ethical issues challenging the sports industry. For each of the issues, you will be tasked with using specific facts and observations to demonstrate why the issue you are improving is indeed a problem in today's sports landscape. You must also include a specific way to fix the problem and why you believe the recommendation will cure this ill in society.

The instructor for class 2 was a 32-year-old female, assistant professor, with five years of teaching experience. This was her first teaching position since obtaining her Ph.D. Class 2 was offered online with structured weekly readings and assignments during a fall semester and the semester was 16 weeks in length. Once every two weeks students attended real-time online class sessions using Blackboard Collaborate. The book used for this class was titled *Fair play: The ethics of sport* (Simon et al. 2014) with additional readings from scholarly journals such as *Ethics & Behavior* (Van Der Hoeven et al. 2020), *philosophies* (Laukyte 2020), and the *Journal of Coaching Education* (Burden and Lambie 2011) as well as popular press sources including *U.S. and World Report*, *Women's Sport Foundation*, and *Harvard Business Review*. Specific topics that were discussed 1) your values and principles, 2) application and strategy 3) competition and violence 4) performance-enhancing drugs and sport 5) racial and gender equity in sport 6) sports in collegiate settings 7) commercialization of sport and, 8) match-fixing and cheating in sport.

One of the main assignments in course 2 was for students to participate in a semester-long leadership experience and reflection on the experience. Eligible leadership activities are defined as experiences that ethically and/or morally contribute to the campus or school community where each student resides, students primarily chose coaching activities where they were able to utilize what they were learning in class and translate it directly to their coaching professions. Each reflection journal included a concise statement of the exact moral issue involved and how the student reacted to the situation during their leadership experience.

### *Instrument*

A questionnaire, "Values, Attitudes, and Behavior in Sport" was used to collect the data for this study. This questionnaire was adapted from the Josephson Institute on Ethics and has been used in previous studies (Deutsch et al. 2022, Strand 2013, Strand and Zeigler 2010, Strand et al. 2018). The researchers obtained permission from the Josephson Institute to use their instrument to collect data. The questionnaire used in this study contained 20 gamesmanship statements. Participants were asked to indicate if the action in the statement was (4) clearly acceptable - a perfectly legitimate action that can be properly taught as "part of the game", (3) acceptable - acceptable under existing standards and expectations, not improper to teach or promote, (2) improper - though many people would think this

is okay, it is inconsistent with my view of sportsmanship, or (1) clearly improper - this is wrong and should not be taught or allowed.

The questionnaire was validated for content, construct, and face validity by a panel of experts who had experience in conducting survey research and were knowledgeable in the field of sport sociology. Cronbach's Alpha measure ( $\alpha=0.938$ ) indicated a high consistency and reliability for the statements on the questionnaire.

### *Procedures*

The questionnaire was posted on Qualtrics before the start of class 1. At the beginning of the semester, class 1 students received an email with a link to the questionnaire. This email asked students to participate in the study by completing the questionnaire. Students had the option of completing or not completing the questionnaire. After class 1 students again received the email with the link for the questionnaire. All students elected to complete both the pre-course questionnaire and the post-course questionnaire. The same questionnaire was used for data collection with class 2. At the beginning of the semester, class 2 students received an email with a link to the questionnaire. This email asked students to participate in the study by completing the questionnaire. Students had the option of completing or not completing the questionnaire. After class 2, students again received the email with the link for the questionnaire. All students elected to complete both the pre-course questionnaire and the post-course questionnaire. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. All subjects were asked to read and acknowledge their willingness to participate via an electronic consent form that was approved by the IRB.

### *Analysis of Data*

Completed questionnaires were collected via Qualtrics. The data were subsequently transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 28). Statistical analysis used to analyze the data included frequencies, percentages, and paired-sample t-tests to determine statistical significance at 0.05. For further analysis, the responses were combined into two categories: clearly acceptable/acceptable (aka, acceptable) and improper/clearly improper (aka, improper).

## **Results**

Results for classes 1 and 2 are reported separately. Class 1 results are shown in Table 1 and class 2 in Table 2. Each table shows the statement, the pre, and post-means and mean change for each statement, and the pre and post-percentage along with the percentage change of participants who indicated the action described in the statement as improper or clearly improper (aka improper).

**Table 1.** Pre-Post Mean and Percentage Change for Class 1

Statement	Pre Mean	Post Mean	Mean Change	Pre %	Post %	% change
1. In a contact sport, a coach instructs players to go after the injured shoulder of the other team's leading player to slow him/ her down or get him/her out of the game.	1.24	1.08	0.-16	100	100	0
2. In baseball/softball, a key player for X is hit by a pitch. In retaliation, X's coach orders his pitcher to throw at an opposing hitter.	1.40	1.44	+0.04	96	100	+4
3. In a contact sport, an athlete deliberately seeks to inflict pain on an opposing player to intimidate him.	1.52	1.42	-0.10	92	92	0
4. The idea that it's wrong to "run up the score" is outdated. A team should continue to score as many points as they possibly can even when the outcome is no longer in doubt.	2.16	1.88	-0.28	68	88	+20
5. In a sport where certain types of contact with an opponent is illegal (e.g., holding, hand-checking, pushing, or grabbing), a coach teaches his or her players to violate the rules in ways that will be least likely to be detected.	1.80	1.52	-0.28	84	88	+4
6. Effective taunting and trash-talking that throws an opponent off his/her game is a legitimate part of competitive sports.	1.92	1.76	-0.16	80	88	+8
7. In a sport where only a certain number of team time-outs are allowed, a coach with no time-outs left to instructs a player to fake an injury to get an "official" time-out.	1.32	1.28	-0.04	96	96	0
8. An athlete, who knows other athletes have done so without getting caught, illegally alters his/her equipment (e.g., hockey stick, baseball bat) to gain an advantage.	1.16	1.12	-0.04	100	100	0
9. In basketball, player X is fouled. Player Y, the team's best free throw shooter, goes to the line to shot the free throw undetected by the ref.	1.28	1.04	-0.24	96	100	+4
10. A coach instructs a groundskeeper to alter the field if the coach believes it will give his/her team an advantage (e.g., soaking a field to slow down opponents, sloping a foul line to keep bunts fair, letting grass grow long, etc.).	1.60	1.32	-0.28	92	96	+4
11. In soccer, during a penalty kick, a goalie, hoping the referee will not call it, deliberately violates the rules by moving forward three steps past the line before the ball is kicked.	1.60	1.36	-0.24	80	92	+12
12. On the winning point of the game, a volleyball player touches the ball before it goes out, but the referee misses the touch. The player says nothing.	2.40	2.12	-0.28	60	76	+16
13. A coach argues with an official intending to intimidate or influence future calls.	1.72	1.44	-0.28	88	88	0

14. In soccer, a player deliberately fakes a foul hoping the best player on the other team will be red carded and removed from the game.	1.36	1.28	-0.08	96	96	0
15. While on the bench, players boo, taunt, and jeer opponents.	1.40	1.32	-0.08	88	96	+8
16. In a game, an official makes a mistake in the score. The coach who benefits says nothing.	1.88	1.72	-0.16	76	80	+4
17. Before an important game, a coach receives an anonymous envelope containing an authentic and current copy of the opponent's playbook. The coach uses it to prepare his/her team.	1.36	1.20	-0.16	96	96	0
18. A coach deliberately swears at an official to get thrown out of the game in order to energize his/her team.	1.84	*1.36	-0.48	80	96	+16
19. To motivate players, a coach uses profanity and personal insults while coaching.	1.48	1.44	-0.04	88	88	0
20. After making a great play, an athlete pounds his/her chest boastfully and does an "in your face" celebration dance in front of an opponent.	1.84	1.68	-0.16	84	88	444 +4

**Table 2. Pre-Post Mean and Percentage Change for Class 2**

	Pre Mean	Post Mean	Mean Change	Pre %	Post %	% Change
1. In a contact sport, a coach instructs players to go after the injured shoulder of the other team's leading player to slow him/her down or get him/her out of the game.	1.29	1.16	-0.13	100	100	0
2. In baseball/softball, a key player for X is hit by a pitch. In retaliation, X's coach orders his pitcher to throw at an opposing hitter.	1.43	1.47	+0.04	100	95	-5
3. In a contact sport, an athlete deliberately seeks to inflict pain on an opposing player to intimidate him.	1.52	1.53	+0.01	95	90	-5
4. The idea that it's wrong to "run up the score" is outdated. A team should continue to score as many points as they possibly can even when the outcome is no longer in doubt.	2.33	2.32	-0.01	52	53	+1
5. In a sport where certain types of contact with an opponent is illegal (e.g., holding, hand-checking, pushing, or grabbing), a coach teaches his or her players to violate the rules in ways that will be least likely to be detected.	1.86	2.05	+0.19	76	79	+3
6. Effective taunting and trash-talking that throws an opponent off his/her game is a legitimate part of competitive sports.	2.67	2.53	-0.14	48	47	-1
7. In a sport where only a certain number of team time-outs are allowed, a coach with no time-outs left to instructs a player to fake an injury to get an "official" time-out.	1.90	1.37	-0.53	81	100	+19

8. An athlete, who knows other athletes have done so without getting caught, illegally alters his/her equipment (e.g., hockey stick, baseball bat) to gain an advantage.	1.33	1.21	-0.12	100	100	0
9. In basketball, player X is fouled. Player Y, the team's best free throw shooter, goes to the line to shot the free throw undetected by the ref.	1.57	1.21	-0.36	91	100	+8
10. A coach instructs a groundskeeper to alter the field if the coach believes it will give his/her team an advantage (e.g., soaking a field to slow down opponents, sloping a foul line to keep bunts fair, letting grass grow long, etc.).	1.81	1.58	-0.53	81	79	-2
11. In soccer, during a penalty kick, a goalie, hoping the referee will not call it, deliberately violates the rules by moving forward three steps past the line before the ball is kicked.	1.76	1.74	-0.02	81	84	+2
12. On the winning point of the game, a volleyball player touches the ball before it goes out, but the referee misses the touch. The player says nothing.	2.62	2.53	-0.09	52	90	+4
13. A coach argues with an official intending to intimidate or influence future calls.	2.29	2.16	-0.13	52	58	+6
14. In soccer, a player deliberately fakes a foul hoping the best player on the other team will be red carded and removed from the game.	1.57	1.42	-0.15	91	95	+4
15. While on the bench, players boo, taunt, and jeer opponents.	2.05	1.95	-0.1	67	68	+1
16. In a game, an official makes a mistake in the score. The coach who benefits says nothing.	2.29	2.05	-0.24	57	79	+22
17. Before an important game, a coach receives an anonymous envelope containing an authentic and current copy of the opponent's playbook. The coach uses it to prepare his/her team.	1.57	1.21	-0.36	81	95	+14
18. A coach deliberately swears at an official to get thrown out of the game in order to energize his/her team.	2.10	2.11	+0.01	67	58	-9
19. To motivate players, a coach uses profanity and personal insults while coaching.	1.76	1.58	-0.18	81	84	+3
20. After making a great play, an athlete pounds his/her chest boastfully and does an "in your face" celebration dance in front of an opponent.	2.43	2.21	-0.22	62	63	.22. +1

For class 1, the pretest mean for all statements combined was 1.61 while the post-test mean was 1.43. This is a positive change and is statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ . In the pretest, the mean response for all but two statements was between 1.16-1.92, indicating the mean scores were between clearly improper and improper. The mean responses for the other two statements were 2.16 and 2.40, indicating the action described in the statement was between acceptable and improper. In the post-test, mean scores for all but one statement were between 1.08

– 1.88. The one other statement had a mean response of 2.12. The percentage of participants who indicated a statement as improper is also shown in table 1. When comparing pre to post-test results, there was a positive percentage change for 12 of the 20 statements and no change for eight of the statements.

For class 2, the pretest mean for all statements combined was 1.90 while the post-test mean was 1.75. This is a positive change and is statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ . In the pretest, the mean response for 12 of the statements was between 2.05-2.67, indicating the mean scores for these statements fell between acceptable and improper. The mean responses for the other eight statements were between 1.29 and 1.90, indicating the action described in the statement was between improper and clearly improper. In the post-test, mean scores for twelve statements were between 1.16 – 1.95, and for eight statements it was between 2.05 – 2.53. The percentage of participants who indicated a statement as improper is also shown in Table 2. When comparing pre to post-test results, there was a positive percentage change for 14 of the 20 statements, no change for one statement, and a negative change for five statements.

## Discussion

Ethics in sports is a controversial subject. Two fans cheering for opposing teams and seeing the same play view it completely differently. If the play is called in your favor, all is good; but if it goes against your team, you feel cheated.

How coaches react to such calls influences their players and their players' judgment of what is right or allowed in sports (Becker 2009, Weathington et al. 2010). For example, consider the statement, "In a game, an official makes a mistake in the score. The coach who benefits says nothing." If players are aware of this mistake and their coach says nothing, it is implied that this is okay. Many would simply say, "it's the official's job to keep track of this." The idea of whatever it takes to win comes to mean exactly that. If it means cheating, so be it. If it means ignoring the obvious, so be it. If it means hurting opposing players, so be it.

The question remains, who determines what is acceptable gamesmanship? Since coaches play such an important role in athlete development, it is incumbent upon them to "do right" and "set the standard". Do right and set the standard, however, are subjective terms, and are certainly interpreted differently by various individuals. For example, in class 2, approximately 50% of respondents identified taunting and trash-talking that throw an opponent off his/her game as a legitimate part of competitive sports and as acceptable sporting behavior. Conversely, the other half identified that as an inappropriate action.

As coach educators, instructors are charged with coach training, education, and development (TED). TED happens through college coaching courses, professional development courses, graduate education, conferences and workshops, and individually by reading books and searching websites. It is well known that participation in any of those events results in increased knowledge and better performance (Bilal et al. 2017). It was encouraging to see that both classes had a positive impact when



measuring student perceptions of gamesmanship. Even though gamesmanship is a small part of ethical behavior in sports, it is an important one as athletes watch and model what their coaches say and what they do (Becker 2009).

## Conclusions

The terms ethics and morals are closely related; the difference is that morals serve as guiding principles while ethics refers to specific actions and behaviors (Diffen n.d.). Seidman (2021) suggested that moral leadership is currently in high demand but is in short supply; that managers who demonstrate higher levels of moral leadership have stronger connections with colleagues; that moral leadership increases business performance; and that professional development opportunities are not doing enough to foster moral leadership. As such, one might argue that including ethics courses in the higher education curriculum could foster better moral decision-making.

Ritter (2006) used two business courses to compare the effect of ethics training. She found that women in the experimental group showed significantly improved moral awareness and decision-making processes. Myyry and Helkama (2010) studied the sensitivity to moral issues from a story with social psychology students. The experimental group students progressed in moral sensitivity from pre-test to post-test while the control group declined significantly. Walker (2011) investigated the impact of an ethics class on students' ethical decision-making. She found increased positive cognitive and affective changes in student perceptions that inform one's value and belief system, the student's ability to remain open-minded and reconsider previous beliefs and actions from a 360-degree perspective, and the student's ability to apply new information to ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Similarly, Schwitzgebel et al. (2020), found that a university ethics course influenced students' purchasing of certain products.

Based on the results of this current study and others, ethics courses should be included within the curriculum of leadership, physical education, and sport administration programs to impact the gamesmanship beliefs of coaches, educators, and athletes; leading to better moral decision-making. As these students often become the coaches and educators who teach the next generation of young athletes appropriate sporting behavior, it is important that they understand ethical reasoning and how to apply moral decision-making in sports settings.

In this and other studies (Strand 2013, 2014, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, Strand et al. 2017, 2018, Strand and Zeigler 2010), it was found that coaches and athletes clearly understand that some gamesmanship actions are inappropriate, as demonstrated by the low scores of the items, but these actions still happen because when faced with the challenge of behaving ethically at the cost of victory, many coaches and athletes feel that winning is more important. As demonstrated by some of the responses in this study, students had differing perceptions of individual gamesmanship actions. As such, the development of standardization of these actions may be beneficial for sports organizations as teams, leagues, and

sports organizations need to have ethical standards to guide coaches, players, and spectator behavior.

### Limitations

In every study, some factors limit the extrapolation of findings. In this study, the subjects were students in two graduate courses offered in a graduate program. Although students were not required to complete the questionnaire some might have believed it was a necessary part of course requirements. A major limitation is the lack of demographic data. For example, subjects could have been asked to identify social-cultural factors which might have provided greater insight into the results. However, since the n was small for each course it would have been difficult to find meaningful differences because the cells for various demographic data would have been very small, or non-existent.

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