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Whatever happened to the Olympic spirit? By Andrew Abbey

In sport, as in life, there have always been people willing to bend or break the rules to win. The Olympic ideal of fair play and sportsmanship is just that—an ideal – because the reality of the Olympic Games is that success is measured in gold, silver and bronze. Be good sportsmen if you can but, above all, win and we will give you a medal. Winning a medal brings fame and fortune. Sadly, being a good sport does not.

The grey area between the Olympic ideal and Olympic reality is a trap into which many athletes have fallen. In badminton four pairs tried to win by deliberately trying to lose. In football a coach instructed his players to avoid winning a match. A young cyclist intentionally crashed to force the restart of a race. These athletes didn't cheat in the same way as drugged-up sprinter Ben Johnson in 1988 or Fred Lorz, who in 1904 hitched a ride by car during the marathon. But they did at least bend the rules right up to – or over – the acceptable limit.

The women badminton players from China, South Korea and Indonesia did not cheat in the conventional sense. They worked out that their best chances of winning a medal were to lose a certain match – they sacrificed a battle to win a war. In short, they wanted to lose to win. Is that so wrong?

Badminton administrators suddenly became zealous about a match-manipulation problem that other players said has long been an open secret in the sport. They ruled that the players didn't use their "best efforts to win a match" and that behavior was "clearly abusive or detrimental to the sport". They disqualified them like common cheats despite the fact that the flawed system that incentivized losses was designed not by the athletes, but by those same administrators.

"The group play system has been a tremendous success," said Thomas Lund, the badminton federation official brought out to face the cameras after it went wrong, "except for the two matches we have dealt with." But it's hard to share his view of a system resulting in the disqualification of most of the tournament's likely medalists as "a tremendous success".

One athlete, who declined to be named, defended the disqualified players. "We dedicate our lives to sport, to winning, to the glory of our countries, and most of all to getting a medal. How can you punish someone so harshly when they were just trying to maximize their medal

chances? Nobody punishes football players when they don't try to win. The players should have been more careful to give the appearance that they were trying to win".

So is that the lesson here? If you must throw a match, be subtle about it? "The regulations very clearly state you have to win every match. And that doesn't mean you can throw some matches to win other matches," said Lund. "There are no two ways about that."

Other sports fall into this morally questionable territory too. When Japanese women's football coach Norio Sasaki told a press conference that he ordered his players to not win their match against South Africa, the reaction was mixed. FIFA's announcement that "there are no sufficient elements to start disciplinary proceedings for unlawfully influencing match results" is hardly a ringing endorsement of his conduct. Asked if she would ever have her team do as Japan did, U.S. coach Pia Sundhage was clear in her response: "Absolutely not. It never ever crossed my mind because I think: Respect the game, respect this wonderful tournament and respect the team. We want to win. If we have that approach to every game, I think we're in the best mindset."

In the latest controversy British cyclist Philip Hindes appeared to intentionally crash following a poor start in the Team Sprint gold medal match, forcing a restart and ending in a victory for Team GB. Silver medalists France have not protested the result as the rules state only that a crash in the early stages will result in a restart. Intentional crashing is not specifically forbidden, but some would say that it's morally questionable at best, dishonest at worst.

Whatever happened to the spirit of the games?

Questions

1. Do you think the badminton players have been so heavily punished? Why? Why not?
2. Should the football team also have been punished? Why? Why not?
3. Should the cyclist have been punished? Why? Why not?
4. What's your view on the unnamed athlete's comments?
5. What do you think about Pia Sundhage's implication that coach Sasaki didn't respect the game, tournament and team? Do you agree? Why? Why not?
6. Do you think that elite athletes bending the rules has a bad influence on society?

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