

## Can a cricket ball influence societal change? Exemplifying societal dichotomy in the tolerance of risk

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### EDITORIAL

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The recent and tragic death of international cricketer Phillip Hughes highlighted an apparent and curious state of cognitive dissonance when considering the consistency of societal engagement with risk. In sport, what is deemed as *acceptable* risk, or dare one say *desired* risk, may be accompanied by a nearly complete absence of legal accountability. At the same time elsewhere in society, there appears an omnipresent trend toward a *zero tolerance* of risk accompanied by a high level of legal accountability, typically in the domains of medical and surgical practice, public health, the environment, occupational health and safety, transportation, and the multiple interpretations, arguments, and contexts around personal or national “security”. But how should society mitigate or convey “risk” in modern times, and does this recent tragedy pave the way for a review of behaviour in modern sport?

The disaster witnessed on 25 November 2014 at the Sydney Cricket Ground in which Hughes died was caused after he was struck by a fast-paced “bouncer” at the base of the skull, resulting in the fatal dissection of his vertebral artery. This short-pitched delivery by Sean Abbott was designed to pressure the batsman<sup>1</sup> and epitomised the poorest imaginable outcome for “gamesmanship”, a tactic that is defined as “the art of winning games by using various ploys and tactics to gain a psychological advantage”.<sup>2</sup> It has previously been suggested

that the sports arena is one in which a “bracketed morality” may exist, one in which the norms of “ethics and moral codes do not apply” and where “victory and aggression are the only virtues”.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this is the contemporaneously neglected and unfashionable concept of “sportsmanship”, where value is placed on *the manner* in which a game is played. Here instead, participation in sports implies an engagement with ethics so that a competitive sporting activity may be characterised by fairness, integrity, responsibility, and respect.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of an ethical compass may help provide us not only with a critical tool to evaluate and judge behaviour, but also give us a moral benchmark that governs our behaviour and activities, particularly when they embrace an implied or explicit risk of harm or injury. The presence of ethics inevitably introduces an element of accountability as is seen, indeed *required* in other societal domains outside sports. With the presence of a risk of injury or death in the sports arena there is a compelling argument to cultivate and ensure the presence of “sportsmanship”, of ethical conduct that installs a measure of individual accountability.

One potential way of understanding this seeming dichotomy between accountability and risk might be in articulation through the “cushion hypothesis”.<sup>4</sup> This hypothesis is used to help understand the way in which risk is managed when applied to financial decisions. It is usually applied in the cultural context when considering an individual’s financial risk-taking behaviour against the background of either a collectivist or individualistic culture. Cultures may in general be placed on a continuum ranging from individualistic to collectivist; in the more collectivist society, individual risk taking may be greater because the collective “steps in to help out any group member who encounters a large and possibly catastrophic loss after selecting a risky option”.<sup>4</sup>

When considering the comparative difference in the risk-related consequences between the sports “culture” and other “cultures” within our own society, it may be seen

that the risk to an individual of legal accountability is arguably displaced by a sports culture that appears collectivistic when it comes to such consideration of individual responsibility. The collectivism appears to have emerged out of a co-dependence between sports administrators, participants, and spectators. In this culture then, the bowler Abbott bears no formal legal responsibility for the rare and fatal outcome causally associated with the delivery of his intimidating “bouncer”, though clearly an onerous personal responsibility weighs upon him. Indeed, such is the difference seen between the sports culture and the other cultures in society that his recently very successful resumption of fast bowling was proclaimed to show “the character he has”.<sup>5</sup>

The role of occupational health and safety may be characterised by the heuristic of hazard identification and its subsequent elimination, isolation, or minimisation in the workplace. Notionally at least, the “workplace” includes the cricket pitch of any professional cricketer or for that matter, the activity arena of any sports person. Formal exemption of professional sports from the occupational health and safety legislation in New Zealand does not appear to be proscribed in the legislation under “exemptions”,<sup>6</sup> and the application of such legislation to sports obviously remains a moot point. Nonetheless, participants are equipped with protective gear and game practices are streamlined in many sports. Implicit in these considered practical risk modifiers lies the recognition of a sporting hazard. However, we do not go so far as to completely eliminate the fundamental risk during the gladiatorial engagement between the fast bowler and a batsman.

The physical risk was dubiously demonstrated by the professional social commentator Piers Morgan who took up arms as an amateur batsman when he took to the batting crease against Brett Lee, a recently retired (2012) Australian professional fast bowler;<sup>7</sup> in this orchestrated exchange, television commentators observed with apparent delight the physical harm (actual and potential) that the rank amateur Morgan was exposed to while facing Lee. This delight in potential harm is familiar to many cricket viewers: cricket fielders are known to sledge batsmen to remind them of the physical harm they are exposed to from bowlers, with Australian cricket captain Michael Clarke recently exposed as telling a batsman to “Get ready for a broken f\*\*\*\*\* arm” when facing fast bowler Mitchell Johnson.<sup>8</sup>

It is speculative to wonder whether Dr W.G. Grace, an English physician and revered influence in the history and development of cricket during the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, would have countenanced Mitchell Johnson’s “brutal”

delivery of a cricket ball at 150kph across the trivial distance of 20.12m.<sup>9</sup> Might he not conceivably have urged the adoption of a longer cricket pitch as a consequence? The time taken for a cricket ball travelling at 150kph to reach the batsman is slightly less than half a second. It lies very close to the outer physiologic margins of translating thought into purposeful physical reaction and perhaps closer to a repeat of a fatal experience of Phillip Hughes than many might care to admit.<sup>9</sup>

Obsessing about risk seems ultimately nihilistic and counterproductive. As time goes by, the risks may become smaller and the obsession greater. Such preoccupation unhealthily constrains usual human behaviour and may have paradoxical and unintended consequence. The *reductio ad absurdum* of such thinking lies in the prevention of birth and therefore the elimination of all risk of injury, illness, and fatality associated with living. Anecdotally, it seems that a growing preoccupation with risk pervades modern Australasian life—we are said to be a risk-averse society and this is thought to result in a plethora of sad and unintended consequences manifested, for example, by a desire not to be involved, not to extend care, or to do nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Another manifestation of risk aversion appears in the breakdown in societal trust, recently exemplified by airline policy not to seat unaccompanied children next to males. This is highlighted in an article in Melbourne’s *The Age* entitled “Airline child seating policies: all men are not potential paedophiles”.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the diminishment of trust in civil society is a problem that potentially dismantles the moral fabric that defines our civility. Fear mongering abounds around risk; this is not new. Political commentator Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956) warned that “The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed—and hence clamorous to be led to safety—by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.”<sup>12</sup>

The existence of an array of government agencies charged with the mitigation of risk relies on a cultural context for support. There is often heavy reliance on relative risk, which tells us nothing about actual risk. Relative risk has become the essentially meaningless and sensationalised expression of risk commonly employed by the mainstream media among others. It is also a favoured tool of those, sometimes overly keen to advocate a particular intervention or policy or to procure funding. In all cases, wider society would be more usefully served

were those citing relative risk to be *required* to simultaneously cite actual risk, thereby educating and enabling a properly informed *independent* decision. Independence in the populace though, is not a quality normally favoured by a nanny state.

When considering the potential influence of culture on risk in sport it is clear that the identification, minimisation, and elimination of all hazards associated with professional sport is unlikely to garner much cultural support. And while an argument remains intellectually compelling for rugby players to wear a high visibility flouro-pink rugby kit, suitable protective padding, protective headgear and gloves, engage in touch tackling and no-push scrummaging, a reduction in ball pressure to render it soft and finally, the presence of police on the sidelines to arrest any player deviation from safe practice on the basis of arrest for personal assault, reckless endangerment, or grievous bodily harm, such nihilistic risk management not only defeats risk, it simultaneously eliminates the sport and the opportunity to express the full range of our humanity observed in the sporting interaction. More importantly, it robs us of the opportunity to seek a nobler expression in sporting endeavour, one that embodies the expression of ethics through “sportsmanlike” behaviour.

While many may agree that sports conducted in the complete absence of risk would seem not only pointless, but something manifestly uninteresting to both vicarious observer and competitive participant, we should nevertheless pose the question regarding how we can more intelligently manage the small risk of a fatal or lifelong catastrophic outcome. Perhaps ethics holds the key, or as it applies to and is known in the sports arena, “sportsmanship”. One potential key to future success in altering current sporting behaviour from one that fixatedly applauds “gamesmanship” may reside with a more mature mainstream media that demonstrates an unwillingness to focus, laud, and sensationalise unethical sporting behaviour—such as taking delight or promoting the physical threat and danger that is possible in so many sports. Enhancing, rewarding, and celebrating “sportsmanship” in order to lift ethical practice in the sporting arena appears a rational way in which to reduce serious or even deadly sporting risk, no matter how small.

It is highly likely there will always be an element of risk in sporting encounters of a physical nature, and that any such exposure in sport will be viewed differently to the potential risks associated with other social interactions. The infrequent instance of a rare and tragic delivery of a cricket ball, as witnessed recently in Sydney, should not be forgotten. “Moving on” to business as usual is not an option. It must be

used instead to catalyse a societal pressure not only to reduce sporting risk by bringing about a re-engagement of ethics in sport—of “sportsmanship”—but also to initiate a change in the sporting culture in 2015 and beyond. In this way, perhaps the societal view of risk can become more consistent, intelligent, and realistic, whether in the sports arena or indeed, throughout wider society.

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### **PEER REVIEW**

Peer reviewed.

### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author is a senior editor at the AMJ.