

The Utilitarian And Libertarian Approaches To Ethics And Its Role In The Sports

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Introduction

Sport presents ethical problems because it combines voluntary competition with rules, bodily risk, public entertainment, money, national identity, and unequal power. Athletes value freedom, but their choices affect opponents, teammates, spectators, and the meaning of the contest. Utilitarianism and libertarianism offer useful but incomplete ways to evaluate these problems. Utilitarian ethics asks which policy produces the greatest overall wellbeing or least harm. Libertarian ethics emphasizes individual liberty, self-ownership, voluntary agreement, and limits on coercion. The two approaches can point in different directions when an athlete wants to accept a risk that regulators believe will damage health or fairness.

The original essay treats utilitarianism as a simple rule to create happiness for the largest number and libertarianism as permission to do whatever a person wants. Both accounts need refinement. Utilitarianism must consider the distribution, probability, and duration of benefits and harms, not merely count pleased spectators. Libertarian freedom ends where fraud, coercion, or violation of agreed rules begins. An athlete who enters a regulated competition voluntarily accepts conditions designed to make performances comparable. The central question is how much authority a sport organization may exercise over the athlete's body and life in order to protect a fair contest.

Utilitarianism and the Welfare of the Sporting Community

A utilitarian analysis includes athletes, opponents, support staff, fans, young people, sponsors, and the public. A policy is justified when its expected benefits exceed its harms across this community. Rules against dangerous equipment, match fixing, and concealed performance enhancement can protect health, confidence, and meaningful competition. Yet utilitarian reasoning can also be abused. A league might argue that an injured athlete should continue because millions of spectators want the game, sacrificing one person to aggregate entertainment. Ethical utilitarianism must give serious weight to intense harm even when imposed on a minority.

Long-term consequences matter. A spectacular collision may excite viewers now while normalizing behavior that produces chronic injury. A profitable tournament may benefit a city while displacing residents or exploiting workers. Utilitarian analysis should therefore use evidence rather than intuition

and should examine who receives benefits and who bears costs. Welfare cannot be measured only through revenue or audience size.

Libertarianism, Autonomy, and Contract

Libertarianism begins with the athlete's authority over their body, labor, and career. Adults may choose dangerous sports, training methods, and medical treatments, provided the choice is informed and does not violate others' rights. This perspective challenges paternalistic rules that protect athletes by removing options without listening to them. It also supports freedom of movement, bargaining, and control over name, image, and likeness.

However, professional sport is not a collection of isolated choices. A player who secretly uses a prohibited enhancer gains an advantage under false terms. Opponents consented to compete within a rule system, not against undisclosed pharmacological assistance. Contracts are also shaped by unequal power. A young athlete may "agree" to intrusive monitoring because refusal ends a career. Libertarian analysis should ask whether consent is meaningful, whether rules were disclosed, and whether athletes had representation in making them.

Doping and the Meaning of Fair Competition

Doping is the clearest test of the two approaches. Performance-enhancing substances or methods may increase strength, endurance, recovery, concentration, or the ability to tolerate training. They can also create medical risk and pressure clean athletes to use them simply to remain competitive. From a utilitarian perspective, prohibition may protect health, preserve trust, and prevent an escalation in which everyone assumes greater risk without gaining a relative advantage.

A strict libertarian might argue that informed adults should decide what to put in their bodies. Yet sport is defined by constitutive rules. A boxer cannot claim liberty to use a hidden weight in a glove, and a sprinter cannot choose a shorter lane. Anti-doping rules are part of the agreed contest. The challenge is making those rules proportionate and scientifically credible. The 2026 World Anti-Doping Agency Prohibited List specifies substances and methods banned at all times or in competition. Athletes also have access to therapeutic-use exemptions when a prohibited treatment is medically necessary and conditions are met. ("World Anti-Doping Agency", n.d.)

Privacy, Testing, and Due Process

Anti-doping enforcement creates harms of its own. Athletes may be required to provide biological samples, disclose whereabouts, list medications, and accept testing outside competition. These measures can invade privacy and create anxiety, especially when data security is weak. A utilitarian defense must show that the system meaningfully deters doping and that intrusion is limited to what is

necessary. A libertarian critique demands clear consent, independent oversight, and the narrow use of collected information. (“World Anti-Doping Agency”, n.d.)

Due process is essential because sanctions can destroy short careers and reputations. Laboratories need quality standards, athletes need notice of allegations and access to evidence, and tribunals need independence. Strict liability can simplify enforcement, but it may punish contamination or medical error severely. Proportionate sanctions should distinguish intentional cheating, negligence, and circumstances unrelated to performance. Education should precede punishment wherever possible.

Health, Paternalism, and Risk

Sport organizations routinely regulate risk through equipment, weight classes, medical suspensions, concussion protocols, and age restrictions. Libertarianism reminds regulators that adults can value achievement enough to accept danger. Utilitarianism reminds athletes that their decisions influence teammates, younger competitors, and systems that may reward concealment. The ethical objective is not to eliminate all risk, which would eliminate sport, but to prevent risks that are unnecessary, hidden, or imposed on people with little bargaining power.

Medical staff face divided loyalties when employed by teams. An athlete may want to return while a coach needs performance and a physician must protect health. Independent medical judgment and confidential care reduce conflicts. Consent is compromised when players fear losing contracts for reporting symptoms. A formal right to choose is hollow if the economic penalty for honest disclosure is overwhelming.

Commercialization, Equality, and Athlete Rights

Ethics in sport extends beyond doping. Broadcasting schedules can disregard sleep and heat, sponsors can promote harmful products, and governing bodies can demand unpaid labor from athletes while executives receive high compensation. Utilitarian analysis asks whether the commercial system produces broad benefits, while libertarian analysis asks whether individuals control their labor and property. Both support transparency and bargaining rights, though for different reasons.

Fairness also concerns access. Rules that appear equal can disadvantage athletes who lack nutrition, coaching, legal advice, or medical support. Wealthy teams may use permitted technologies unavailable to others. Anti-doping cannot create complete equality, but organizations should not describe every legal advantage as morally neutral. Competitive integrity depends on institutional design as well as individual obedience. (“World Anti-Doping Agency”, 2021)

Applying Both Approaches

Utilitarianism is strongest when evaluating population effects, health systems, and the sustainability of rules. Libertarianism is strongest when protecting bodily autonomy, privacy, speech, and freedom from unnecessary control. Each corrects the other. Pure aggregation can sacrifice individuals, while pure self-ownership can ignore coercive competition and shared institutions. Ethical sports governance should therefore use the least restrictive rule capable of protecting a legitimate objective, involve athletes in decision-making, publish evidence, and provide appeal.

Doping rules are justified not because athletes lose all authority over their bodies, but because participants enter a rule-governed practice in which secret enhancement affects everyone. That justification weakens when prohibited lists lack evidence, testing becomes needlessly intrusive, or sanctions ignore intent. Fairness must apply to regulators as well as competitors.

The therapeutic-use exemption illustrates how the two theories can be combined. Some athletes need otherwise prohibited medicines for genuine medical conditions. A blanket ban would maximize administrative simplicity but could exclude disabled or ill competitors unfairly. An unrestricted right to self-declare medical need would weaken the common rule. A fair system permits necessary treatment through confidential evidence, independent review, and consistent criteria, while limiting disclosure to what is required. This arrangement protects welfare and competition without demanding that athletes surrender all medical privacy.

Team selection, sex classification, and eligibility rules create similarly difficult cases. Utilitarian reasoning may emphasize competitive categories, safety, and public confidence, while libertarian reasoning emphasizes bodily autonomy, identity, and freedom from intrusive testing. Neither slogan resolves the empirical questions. Governing bodies should define the sporting objective precisely, use current evidence, avoid unnecessary humiliation, and provide review as science and social understanding change. Ethical rules are strongest when affected athletes participate in their design rather than being treated only as problems to regulate.

Fans and sponsors also belong in the moral analysis, though their preferences should not override athlete rights. Commercial pressure can encourage athletes to compete while injured, hide mental distress, or accept schedules designed mainly for broadcasting. A utilitarian calculation that counts audience pleasure but ignores concentrated harm would be distorted. Libertarian consent is also weak when contracts, career length, and replacement pressure leave little practical freedom. Sports ethics must examine the institutions that shape a choice, not merely whether an athlete signed a form.

Conclusion

Utilitarian and libertarian ethics reveal different dimensions of sport. Utilitarianism emphasizes collective welfare, health, trust, and the long-term consequences of a policy. Libertarianism

emphasizes autonomy, voluntary agreement, property, and limits on institutional power. Neither theory alone resolves doping, injury, commercialization, or privacy.

The most defensible sporting system protects meaningful competition while treating athletes as rights-bearing participants rather than instruments of entertainment. It prohibits deception and dangerous coercive races, but it also limits surveillance, provides therapeutic exemptions and due process, and gives athletes a voice in governance. Ethical sport is not defined only by obeying rules. It requires rules that are themselves fair, transparent, evidence-based, and proportionate.

References

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