

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A preliminary comparative study of rugby and football spectators' attitudes towards violence**

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**Rugby and football (soccer) are both international sports, and economic entities in their own right, as evidenced by the growth in attendance and television viewership at the respective World Cups. The issue of sport as catharsis, or conversely, as aggression-generating event, has always been controversial. In order to assess the orientation of rugby and football spectators towards violence, 404 spectators were surveyed. Results indicate significant differences between rugby and football spectators, with football spectators exhibiting higher levels of aggression towards the referee and opposing players. It emerged that the concept of sport as catharsis is not a reality when the spectators' side loses a match. A call is made for extensive education of all role players in football if the sport is not to be negatively affected.**

**Key words:** Aggression, catharsis, football, rugby, spectators and violence.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rugby and football (soccer) are both international sports, and economic entities in their own right. The 2007 Rugby World Cup which took place in France is described as the most successful to date. Attendance and viewership, as well as economic impact on a broad front, established the sport as a significant entity in the sporting world. Total attendance was 2.25 million, while television viewer ship attracted 119 broadcasters with an estimated audience of 4.2 billion people. In comparison, the attendance at the 2003 Australian event was 1.9 million, while television viewer ship was 3.4 billion. These figures should be juxtaposed against figures for the 1987 event in New Zealand, when the Rugby World Cup commenced - attendance was 600 000, and television audience was estimated at 230 million (RWC 2007 confirmed as record - breaker).

Football, in comparison, has a significantly longer history in World Cup Tournaments than rugby. The first tournament of the eighteen to date was held in 1930 in Uruguay. Television coverage of the 2006 FIFA World Cup attracted a cumulative audience of 26.29 billion, while 3.4 million spectators passed through the turnstiles (2006 FIFA World Cup broadcast wider, longer and farther than ever before). Clearly, in view of the statistics

above, a significant proportion of the global population display a strong interest in the two sports. The popular perception is that involvement in a sporting activity is psychologically healthy-refer the ancient Latin quotation: "Sit mens sana in corpore sano" (a healthy mind in a healthy body). Conversely, and this is at the heart of the debate, involvement in sport could generate and breed aggressive behaviour and violence.

Sport is regarded by some theorists as cathartic in nature. This sentiment was evaluated by Richard Sipes, an American anthropologist in 1973 (as quoted in Atyeo (1978). In this seminal work, the learned-aggression theory was tested against the drive discharge theory, and it was conclusively proved that learned aggression is a phenomenon of warlike societies (which predominantly play combative sports). The drive discharge theory thus was discredited, and Sipes' perceptual model therefore stipulated that aggressive behaviour within societies could be significantly reduced by the elimination or downscaling of combative or conflict related sports (Atyeyo, 1978, p.373).

Rugby and football both fall into the above category. Incidents of violent and aggressive behaviour, both on and off the field of play, are simply too numerous to mention. The whole field is well - documented and soundly researched. Numerous studies exist on the subject of football hooliganism, and there are differing theoretical

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viewpoints in this regard. It is certainly not a novel field of investigation. Issues such as the essential nature of the game (defensive with low scores), its working class roots, and organised gangsterism have been extensively investigated. In the popular press, the term "football hooliganism" yields 7.1 million hits on Google, while an academic database, Academic Search Premier on Epscohost renders 4980 articles. Respected theorists include Dunning (1992), Goldstein (1983) and Guilanotti et al. (1994).

Russell (2003:1) stipulates that situational, environmental, social and cognitive variables all play major roles in spectator violence. In order to arrive at a simplistic cause - effect relationship, is therefore both implausible and inadvisable. The reality remains however, that authorities cannot be passive. Ward (2002, p.1) stipulates that spectator violence has always been associated with sport. In this context, he cites the example of a chariot race in Constantinople in 532 BC which caused a riot, and led to the deaths of an estimated 30 000 people. He further states that the extent and scope of spectator violence in earlier times were greater than it is in the present era. His perception is that moral panic about an uncontrollable situation is therefore not justified.

Ward's position is supported on a macro societal level, but on a micro level, note should be taken of the words of Wolfson and Neave (2005, p.233) who found that football officials are routinely exposed to stressors from spectators, and that 71% of their referee subject sample were physically drained after matches. They further stipulate that football referees experience elevated levels of stress prior to, during and after a match. In this context, it is of interest to recall the perspective of Patrick (1903, p.106): "The spectators, under the excitement of a great game, become hoodlums, exhibiting violent partisanship and gross profanity.... Heaping abuse upon the referee, restrained often times only by the players themselves from inflicting upon him actual bodily injury."

This historical perspective indicates that a referee was vulnerable to violence more than one hundred years ago. At present, it is surprising to realise that FIFA does not expressly consider abuse of the referee as a sending - off offence, while spitting at an opponent warrants a red card. The only protection for the referee can be found in the somewhat facile rule 8 (A), which stipulates that all players must respect the authority of the referee (<http://www.fifa.com/worldfootball/lawsofthegame.htm>). A major proposed alteration to this position is that of the Football Association in England who is presently considering implementing a so-called: "area of exclusion", which would forbid players from intruding upon the referee's personal space on the field of play.

In this context, Ford (2005) cites the example of top referee Anders Frisk who terminated his career as referee, citing death threats he received subsequent to a controversial match in which he officiated. He further alludes to Urs Meier, who received 6 000 insulting e-

mails, including death threats, after a British newspaper published his e-mail address. Meier became the target of hate mail because he disallowed an England goal against Portugal in the European championship. Ford (2005) quotes William Gaillard, a spokesperson for UEFA, who stated that UEFA sees no obvious solution to the problem, and that it is extremely difficult to protect the privacy of the referees.

Juxtaposed against this, incidents of player/spectator abuse of referees by rugby players at first class level are of miniscule magnitude. There are only two examples of such incidents in South Africa at first class level: Percy Montgomery who made physical contact with a referee while playing in Wales, and recently, the much publicised incident when Schalk Burger verbally abused a touch judge. This is borne out by a study which was done to determine the sources of stress and burnout among 682 rugby referees in Wales, Scotland and England. Rainey and Hardy (1999, p.797) found that three stress factors (performance concerns, time pressure and interpersonal conflict) were identified as stressors, but fear of physical harm was not related to referee stress.

The particular focus of this article revolves around the attitudes of spectators towards violence. Again, this sociological phenomenon has earned in-depth investigation over the years. However, with both the rugby and football world cups still close in proximity on a time scale, and as South Africa is host country of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, it is of interest to investigate the perceptions/attitudes of spectators, and to evaluate possible differentials between rugby and football spectators.

The primary focus was on the attitudinal condoning of violence and aggression by players, with the receptors of the aggression being the referee (authority figure) and opposing players. Violence/ aggression can be manifested in various and diverse ways, and could conceivably be classified on a continuum ranging from mild verbal abuse/ insults to physical assault in extremis. In this context, the work of Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease (2001) bears relevance: the authors quote the work of Lewis (1980), who developed a typology for categorising violent spectator behaviour: verbal assault, disrupting play, throwing missiles, fighting and vandalism.

In the context of verbal abuse, Wann et al (2001, pp.97-98) refer to an American study which investigated the attitudes of 500 spectators at a football match: 75% had shouted insults, 41% said that fans should be allowed to say what they want, while 18% considered verbal abuse to be funny in nature. This behaviour is not limited to particular countries: in China, football spectators at the Workers' Stadium in Beijing are so riotous that their behaviour has been labelled as the "Beijing Curse". Spectator violence can thus be regarded as an "active" behaviour, where the spectator personally participates in terms of the Lewis continuum. It could also be less active (and possibly less sinister), in the sense that the spectator becomes and remains a passive observer of

aggressive behaviour. It should be noted here that active violent behaviour by spectators is not the focus of this study. Rather, the first category in the Lewis typology is of relevance here, i.e. verbal abuse, and specifically verbal abuse of the referee by players. The secondary focus was whether spectators would condone/approve violent behaviour by players vis-à-vis opposing players.

## METHODOLOGY

As the study is essentially exploratory in nature, an elementary methodology was constructed by utilising a simplistic four item survey. Subjects were approached at a sports stadium in Cape Town, South Africa, which is used by both the rugby and football codes. It should be noted that the language in the items had to be amended at times in order to ensure that subjects (chosen at random) comprehended the essence of the question item - this could hypothetically cast doubt on content validity, although it is not likely that the questions were distorted. Four questions were put to the subjects:

- 1.) Is it justifiable for players to verbally abuse the referee?
- 2.) Is it justifiable for players to verbally abuse opposing players?
- 3.) Is it justifiable for players to physically abuse the referee?
- 4.) Is it justifiable for players to physically abuse opposing players?

A four point close-ended Likert Scale was utilised for noting responses: Never, occasionally, frequently, and always.

In order to superficially approximate an understanding of the "sport as catharsis" phenomenon, three sets of surveys was conducted, both for rugby and football spectators:

- Event one: Before the game
- Event two: After the game (side won)
- Event three: After the game (side lost)

The number of respondents to event one (before the game) was 193 rugby spectators (101 male and 92 female) and 211 football spectators (129 male and 82 female).

The number of respondents to event two (after the game - side won) was 98 (rugby) and 103 (football).

The number of respondents to event three (after the game - side lost) was 91 (rugby) and 97 (football).

The data was gathered over a period of three months, and included four rugby and six football matches.

It should be noted here that the data which was collected pre and post game was not from the same sample. The nature of the investigation precluded this. The study should therefore not to be considered empirical in nature- it merely reflects an attitudinal measurement of a similar sample type under two differing circumstances (pre and post game).

Variables such as age and socio-economic status were not considered, and, problematically, gender statistics were not provided for events two and three. This is construed as a limitation of the study, as no conclusions can be drawn regarding the gender differential in attitudes.

The results were analysed by using the student t-test to analyse differences between groups.

## RESULTS

The obtained raw data is displayed in Table 1. It should be noted that numerical values were assigned to the

Likert responses: Never (1), occasionally (2), frequently (3), and Always (4). From the above it is apparent that all four tests indicate significant differences in the opinions of rugby and football spectators before a game, this being at the 0.05 level of significance.

Football spectators are significantly more pro verbal abuse of the referee than rugby spectators. This is reflected by the means: 3.33 and 1.23 respectively.

A similar finding appears regarding the physical abuse of a referee (means respectively 1.64 and 1.17, with a t-value of -5.7). It is noted that the mean in this case indicates a lower level of approval of physical violence, which is not surprising. Football spectators approve verbal abuse of players at a significant higher level than rugby spectators (means 3.09 and 2.13 respectively), but the finding is reversed for the two codes when physical abuse of players is considered (2.69 and 2.92). This finding correlates with the nature of the two codes, as physical abuse is inherently part of the rugby code. It should be noted that the term "abuse" is utilised here in a semantic context. In a definitive framework, rugby lends itself to greater physical contact and violence than football, and the term "abuse" is therefore generically somewhat diluted in this context. However, it is retained solely for comparative purposes.

Three of the four tests indicate that there are significant differences in the opinion of rugby and football spectators after a game (when their side won the game). A similar pattern to the findings in Table 2 emerges, and it is significant to note that, when a simple comparison of the means are done (Table 2 and 3) lower levels of both verbal and physical abuse towards the referee and players are exhibited. This would lend credence to the sport as catharsis theory, although it should be noted again that results were obtained from different subject samples.

All four tests show that there are significant differences in the opinions of rugby and football spectators after the game (when their side lost). There are significant increases in the levels of acceptance of abuse, directed at both the referee and opposing players. It should be noted here that the acceptance of verbal abuse of the referee by rugby spectators (mean 2.42) is significantly higher than either before the game (mean 1.23) and when their side had won (mean 1.14). This finding illustrates the converse of the drive discharge theory, and is indicative of the identification of a scapegoat to blame for the loss, in this case the referee. It is apparent that the findings here relate to higher levels of frustration and aggression in spectators.

The findings above relate to a comparative analysis of rugby and football spectators. Care should be taken in drawing broad conclusions based on means, and therefore a finer analysis had to be undertaken in terms of the two sporting codes.

The only significant difference in this condition (the opinions of rugby spectators before the game as compared to after the game [side won]) is that there is a

**Table 1.** Raw data: rugby vs football.

		Rugby				Football			
		Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always
Event one	Verbal Abuse: referee	170	11	3	9	12	11	83	105
	Verbal Abuse: Players	86	20	63	24	26	40	32	113
	Physical Abuse: Referee	167	22	2	2	148	12	31	20
	Physical Abuse: Players	21	50	45	77	33	61	55	62
n:193						n = 211			
		Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always
Event two	Verbal Abuse: referee	90	3	4	1	27	15	21	40
	Verbal Abuse: Players	47	21	24	6	7	36	28	30
	Physical Abuse: Referee	91	3	1	3	56	39	5	3
	Physical Abuse: Players	20	37	18	23	4	60	16	23
n:98						n: 103			
		Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Always
Event three	Verbal Abuse: referee	9	48	21	13	3	8	24	62
	Verbal Abuse: Players	8	27	36	20	3	3	27	64
	Physical Abuse: Referee	70	16	3	2	48	8	22	19
	Physical Abuse: Players	8	12	23	48	5	21	68	3
n::97						n : 91			

**Table 2.** Rugby vs Football: Before game.

Rugby	Football		Results			
Before the game	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	1.2280	0.6996	3.3318	0,8188	-27.6403	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	2.1295	1.1221	3.0995	1.1018	-8.7614	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.1658	0.4716	1.6351	1.0486	-5.7110	0.0000
Physical abuse: players	2.9223	1.0454	2.6919	1.0578	2.1985	0.028

**Table 3.** Rugby vs Football: side won.

Rugby	Football				Results	
	After a game: Side won	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	1.1429	0.5177	2.7184	1.2321	-11.7128	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	1.8878	0.9832	2.820	0.9489	-6.6751	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.1429	0.5744	1.5631	0.7231	-4.5477	0.0000
Physical abuse: players	2.4490	1.0661	2.5631	0.8820	-08.286	0.4083

**Table 4.** Rugby vs Football: after game: side lost.

After the game: Side lost	Rugby		Football		Results	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	2.4176	0,8572	3.4948	0.7789	-9.0268	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	2.7473	0.9018	3.5670	0,7056	-6.9643	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.3077	0.6445	2.1237	1.2269	-5.6542	0.0000
Physical abuse: players	3.2198	0.9866	2.7113	0.6117	4.2752	0.0000

significant reduction in the level of condoned physical abuse of players. It can be hypothesized that spectators are more forgiving and magnanimous towards players from the opposing team after their side had won.

All four tests show significant differences in this scenario. This is in support of the comparison of means which were discussed earlier. It is apparent that losing a game leads to higher levels of aggression in rugby spectators - proving that there cannot be catharsis in a negative/loss scenario. The learned aggression theory therefore finds strong validation in the findings above.

All four tests show significant differences between the two conditions for rugby spectators (side won vs side lost), with the lowest significance at the 0.1 level relating to the perception of justified physical abuse of the referee. Again, the concept of sport as catharsis is disproved.

There are significant differences in the opinions of football spectators before and after a game when their side won, with regard to the issue of verbal abuse. There are no differences regarding physical abuse. In essence the pattern reflects that of rugby spectators, and significant indicates that winning is indeed cathartic in nature.

It is noted here that for football spectators there are significant increases in the approval of verbal abuse of players, and more disconcerting, approval of physical abuse of the referee. Again, as in rugby, a "revenge"

motive can be hypothesized. It should also be noted that the approval of verbal abuse of the referee is very high in both conditions (means 3, 33 and 3, 49 respectively).

Three of the four tests indicate significant differences between the two conditions, with elevated levels of frustration and aggression probably responsible for the obtained results - further confirmation of the learned - aggression hypothesis.

## Conclusion

The present study has intimated that there are significant differences in the attitudes of rugby and football spectators towards violence. The causative factors for this phenomenon are inherently multi-focal in nature. As is evidenced in the study, there can be no conclusive evidence supporting sport as catharsis phenomenon, the learned - aggression hypothesis, or other theoretical viewpoints. There are too many contradictory findings which mitigate against the adoption of a fixed theoretical perspective (refer for instance to Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10). The obtained results can certainly not be regarded thus as confirming a particular theoretical viewpoint (e.g. catharsis), but illustrates that there is conceivably a hypothetical co-existence between the catharsis and learned aggression theories.

**Table 5.** Rugby: before vs after: side won.

Before a game			After a game –side won		Results	
Rugby	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	1.2280	0.6996	1.1429	0.5177	1.0651	0.2877
Verbal abuse: players	2.1295	1.1221	1.8878	0.9832	1.8090	0.0715
Physical abuse: Referee	1.1658	0.4716	1.1429	0.5744	0.3639	0.7162
Physical abuse: players	2.9223	1.0454	2.4490	1.0611	3.6258	0.0003

**Table 6.** Rugby: before vs after: side lost.

Before the game			After a game – side lost		Results	
Rugby	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	1.2280	0.6996	2.4176	0.8572	12.4157	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	2.1295	1.1221	2.7473	0.9018	-4.5966	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.1658	0.4716	1.3077	0.6445	-2.0939	0.0372
Physical abuse: players	2.9223	1.0454	3.2198	0.9866	-2.2780	0.0235

**Table 7.** Rugby: side won vs side lost.

After a game - side won			After a game - side lost		Results	
Rugby	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	1.1429	0.5177	2.4176	0.8572	-12.4748	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	1.8878	0.9832	2.7473	0.9018	-6.2485	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.1429	0.5744	1.3077	0.6445	-1.8588	0.0646
Physical abuse: players	2.4490	1.0661	3.2198	0.9866	-5.1475	0.0000

Care should be taken in interpreting the results of the present study. As the title indicates, it is a preliminary study which purports to investigate an extremely complex phenomenon. It would be simplistic to conclude that a sporting event (in this case, the hypothetical independent variable) could produce consequences in terms of attitudinal variations (the hypothetical dependent variable)

in a subject sample. The elementary methodological flaw in the present study was the fact that pre and post data was obtained from different (but not differing) subject samples. No clear cause-effect relationships can therefore be identified.

Further, it is noted that there is a range of powerful extraneous variables which are dominant in a study of

**Table 8.** Football: before vs after: side won.

Before a game			After a game - side won		Results	
Soccer	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	3.3318	0.8188	2.7184	1.2321	5.2419	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	3.0995	1.1018	2.8020	0.9489	2.3312	0.0204
Physical abuse: Referee	1.6351	1.0486	1.5631	0.7231	0.6273	0.5309
Physical abuse: players	2.6919	1.0578	2.5631	0,8820	1.0679	0.2864

**Table 9.** Football: before vs. after (side lost).

Before a game			After a game - side lost		Results	
Soccer	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T- value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	3.3318	0.8188	3.4948	0.7789	-1.6485	0.1003
Verbal abuse: players	3.0995	1.1018	3.5670	0.7057	-38314	0.0002
Physical abuse: Referee	1.6351	1.0486	2.1237	1.2269	-3.5962	0.0004
Physical abuse: players	2.6919	1.0578	2.7113	0.6117	-01681	0.8667

**Table 10.** Football: side won vs. side lost.

After a game - side won			After a game- side lost		Results	
Soccer	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	T-value	p-value
Verbal abuse; Referee	2.7184	1.2321	3.4948	0.7789	-5.2897	0.0000
Verbal abuse: players	2.8020	0.9489	3.5670	0.7057	-6.4167	0.0000
Physical abuse: Referee	1.5631	0.7231	2.1237	1.2269	-3.9637	0.0001
Physical abuse: players	2.5631	0.8820	2.7113	0.6117	-1.3732	0.1712

this nature. Issues such as social orientation, educational levels, socio-economic differentials and others, would categorically impact on attitudes of spectators. It is not absurd to claim that the nature of the supporters of the two sporting codes illustrate fundamental differences, especially in South Africa.

However, it is not the stated intention of the present study to attempt a detailed investigation of cause-effect relationships. The preliminary point of departure was that

exposure to a sporting event could result in attitudinal shifts in a body of spectators, and the results of the study offer peremptory evidence of this nature. It is indeed a call for intervention to prevent escalating problems in the future.

To equilibrate the latter position, it is noted that attitudes do not conclusively predict or cause behaviour, as was illustrated by the theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977, p.8).

Clearly, a process of education of all those involved in the sport has become an urgent necessity. Control over spectators is of dire importance if the sport is not to be tarnished by increasing disregard of and contempt for referees. The sport itself is under threat, and pertinently so if the learned aggression reality, (especially when losing a match) is reviewed. Morality in sport should not be discarded as a side issue, as Woods (2007, p.170) states: "Performance sports in which competition and winning are paramount have dramatically influenced sporting behaviour in recent years. The value of winning may become such a seductive goal that all thoughts of moral behaviour are temporarily put aside."

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