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AGGRESSIVE SPORTS AND MUTUAL DEPENDENCE

Synopsis: The emotional demands of aggressive athletic competition can have an even more profound impact upon the individual participant than the physical toll – which itself is heavy. If the participant is not aware, on some level, of the paradoxical nature of the required behaviors; if the participant is not able to effectively maintain appropriate boundaries between the field of play/competition and their every-day life; if the participant is not able to maintain “reasonable” limits on the extent of pain and injury they are willing to accept and mete out – then the risk of “real life” personal dysfunction is extremely high.

Complex emotional reactions occur during athletic endeavors in which the primary intent is not to injure the opponent but aggressive interactions inherently occur while at the same time, the competitors are mutually dependent upon each other for their safety (e.g., including sports such as horse racing, car racing, etc.).

These are competitions in which there is a *constant risk* of danger; accidents can and do happen; intense “action” is expected and constitutes “part of the game” – but within these competitions, poor judgment, lack of skill, foolhardy aggressiveness or excessive risk taking put multiple participants at severe risk.

In this situation, the relationships between the competitors include an intricate and difficult balance between camaraderie and rivalry. There exists a large grey area between dangerous aggression and uncompetitive timidity. Differences in attitude, skill and risk-taking may create problems in relationships both between teammates and between competitors, which can in turn, increase danger on the field of play.

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While most of the participants will accept the inherent risks and maintain a cordial if not friendly relationship outside of competition, distrust and hostility occur – between individuals, between “cliques”, between teams and within teams. Additionally, the *consistency* of the risk at all times leads to a heightened level of (conscious or unconscious) awareness, vigilance and in the extreme, distrust and/or anger. This is an experience that can induce post-traumatic-like responses and symptomatology.

Competitors may have difficulty “turning off” this level of aggressiveness and vigilance when not on the field of play. There can be difficulty coping with “normal” life. When not on the field of play, on a less conscious level, there can also be a sense of loneliness, a loss of the *interpersonal closeness* derived from the consistent mutual dependence upon peers.

Over-aggressiveness, regressive timidity, “living in the past”, entering problematic relationships and sexual activities, seeking to regain the “rush” through other risk-taking behaviors and/or turning to alcohol or illicit drugs are not uncommon responses.

A unique “twist” and intensification of these issues and dynamics occurs in the world of Professional Wrestling. In the professional wrestling ring, violent contact is obviously inherent to the “action” and there is intentional infliction of pain and “minor” injury upon “opponents” – but there is also a clear responsibility and motivation to protect the opponent from significant harm, along with the expectation that the opponent also will be providing adequate protection, even while causing “minor” injury and significant discomfort.

Professional Wrestling does not involve “competition” vis-à-vis the outcome of specific matches, but there is nothing “fake” regarding the intense physical contact, frequent “minor” injury, significant chronic pain and constant risk of severe injury – as well as a very real and significant competition to “make it to the top” among other “workers.” Securing a place within a promotion occurs by exhibiting physical talent as well as having the ability to protect other individuals within the company from serious injury. The difference between being a top-level performer and in the “minor leagues” is tremendous, with only a small percentage of these athletes being able support themselves by wrestling alone, while the highest echelon may earn seven-figure incomes.

Perhaps more than any other athletic endeavor or sport, Professional Wrestling recapitulates issues of childhood adversity and trauma – both for the fans and for the competitors (although the same dynamics are often “in play” on a more subtle level in other sports). As opposed to the pure aggression and violence displayed in boxing or MMA (and at times in other sports such as football, hockey, etc.) and as opposed to the rather impersonal violence that occurs in team competitions, professional wrestlers are

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“working together” and are, for the most part, friends and colleagues while actually *harming* each other – but the harm is done “for your own good” and “for the good of profession” without intent to cause “serious” injury. On a usually deeply unconscious level, this is an enactment of the relationship of a child to a harshly disciplining parental figure – or in the (unfortunately not uncommon) situation, an abusive parent. That is, the fan and the wrestler are actually identifying with either the abused child who is suffering at the hands of someone whom they believe actually cares for them (and who actually does care for them in a distorted manner) or the fan and the wrestler are actually identifying the abusive parent who sadistically “punishes” the child but under the guise of “caring” and/or in a fit of rage that is expected to be “excused” because they “really” care. This creates a milieu in which the emotions related to abuse can be “safely” (at least for the fan) symbolically expressed rather than repressed and denied. While some may gain a sense of relief in this manner, this type of acting out is not necessarily a healthy or healing process.

The emotional demands of aggressive athletic competition can have an even more profound impact upon the individual participant than the physical toll – which itself is heavy. If the participant is not aware, on some level, of the paradoxical nature of the required behaviors; if the participant is not able to effectively maintain appropriate boundaries between the field of play/competition and their every-day life; if the participant is not able to maintain “reasonable” limits on the extent of pain and injury they are willing to accept and mete out – then the risk of “real life” personal dysfunction is extremely high.