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Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz won't fight a third time,  
<https://www.si.com/mma/2016/08/22/dana-white-conor-mcgregor-nate-diaz-trilogy-third-fight>

## THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE: DIFFICULTIES FACED IN THE ATHLETIC CAREER TRANSITION OF CONTACT SPORT ATHLETES

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper will examine the effects of enabling violence, the provocation of violent tendencies, and, ultimately, the emotional draw to violence in the lived experience of individuals who have competed in contact sports. Many athletes will leave the unique social arena perpetuated in contact sports for careers in a society governed by laws of civility and propriety that suppress and deter the level of aggression and violence condoned in their former career. Many of the participants in this study expressed how they find satisfaction in violence and were initially drawn to contact sports as a result of the longing to express violent mindsets and behaviors. However, in the advent of retirement, participants expressed how they often miss the process of releasing aggression and engaging in physical contact regularly. The vacuum for violence experienced in retirement often led to certain psychosocial frustrations for participants in their lives after sport.*

**KEY WORDS:** Aggressive Outlets, Reversal Theory, Violence and Motivation, Violence and Arousal, Psychoanalysis, Athletic Career Transition, Contact Sports, Catharsis, Social Reintegration

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent attention has been paid to the serious difficulties that former contact sport athletes may face in their career transitions out of competition. Much of the attention has been offered through the lens of neuropsychology and the discovery of the singular neuropathology chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in the brains of deceased former contact sport athletes (Stern, et al., 2011). Nonetheless, some of the correlating symptoms to CTE – irritability, explosive outbursts, rage, domestic abuse, high-risk behavior, suicidality, and an outright display of violent mindsets and antisocial behaviors – can also be tied to the promotion of violence inherent in contact sports. Despite the volumes of research being produced around head trauma, only a relatively small amount of formal psychological research has been offered examining how contact sport athletes respond to the conditioned cognition of violence formed in their athletic careers (Zillman, et al., 1972; Woods, 2016).

This paper will examine the effects of promoting violence, the provocation of violent tendencies, and, ultimately, the emotional draw to violence for individuals who have worked in a career that encourages and allows violence and aggression. Many athletes will leave the unique social arena of violence perpetuated in contact sports for a career in a society governed by laws of civility and propriety that suppress and deter the level and types of aggression and violence endorsed in their former career. Much theory in psychology speculates that the draw to violence is only a conditioned acquisition of behavior over time. However, many individuals in this study expressed how they simply find satisfaction in acting aggressively and engaging in violent circumstances. Several expressed how they were initially drawn to contact sports as a result of this longing to express violent mindsets and behaviors and now, in the advent of retirement, they simply miss the process of releasing aggression and engaging in physical contact regularly.

In the conclusion, an examination of psychodynamic theory will be appropriate in attempting to conceptualize the draw of violence. Beyond this theoretical examination, this paper will investigate the psychosocial effects of being trained and rewarded to perform violence and release aggression on such a regular basis. Focus will be on how these effects may play a significant role in causing complications for the athlete in his or her career transition

out of contact sports. I will hypothesize that the ability to replicate some emotional, social, and physical aspects of violence as it was experienced in one's career may also prove imperative in one's transition back into civil society.

## **CATHARSIS AND INSTINCT THEORIES**

Catharsis and instinct theories must be addressed in attempting to conceptualize the draw to violence for individuals who find they long for unique expressions of aggressive mindsets and behaviors. Freud – as well as psychoanalytic theory, at large – has devoted serious intellectual resources in attempting to conceptualize why some humans are so easily provoked and so readily enticed by violence, antisocial relations, and high-risk situations. Freud's original conceptualization of this propensity was coined the death instinct, appearing as a revision of his view of the economic delivery of drives in his enigmatic text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922/2010). For Freud, the theory of Thanatos takes much of its original inspiration from the - at the time - recent scientific discovery of cells in the human body that are biologically designed to die. This biological anomaly serves as a metaphor for Freud; a metaphysical theory of human existence that is able to account for our most confounding behavior, thought, and desire. From this theoretical jumping off point, Freud attempts to make sense of desires and behaviors that muddy the otherwise clear divide between our pursuit of pleasure and our avoidance of pain. Freud points to a series of case studies - veterans experiencing relived trauma from war, individuals suffering from repetitive compulsion disorders, masochistic behavior, and even a close examination of a peculiar game his grandson would play when his mother (Freud's daughter) left the home to travel - that demanded he reexamine his original understanding of drives as pleasure seeking and pain avoiding/reducing. Freud articulates this Thanatos as, "an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things." In other words, the primal biological urge in all life to ultimately return to the origin of non-existence (i.e. death) (Freud, 1922/2010).

Beyond this earlier text, Freud's seminal work *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/1962) most succinctly espouses his theory of evolutionary instincts that must be addressed if humans are going to live within societal bounds and overcome neurosis. For Freud, civilization was a great advancement of human evolution. Moving out of torrid world of

survival and reproduction, savagery and will, and animal tendencies that humans engaged in for thousands of years was a major evolutionary step forward. Yet, sacrificed in the civilized advancement of law, order, and safety were a whole array of mindsets, behaviors, and social engagements that were originally present and, thus, natural to the human psyche. The repression of these primal instincts - either through law and order or through the psychosocial tendency to uphold one's propriety and refute the acknowledgement of their existence - formed a sense of neurosis in our psyche and, consequently, hysterical conversions revealed as symptoms in our body. Freud saw these instincts as a form of psychosomatic energy that must have some proper cathartic release even within the rigorous demands of living in an organized, peaceful, and civilized society. For Freud, this catharsis would be psychotherapy, but later thinkers in the tradition of psychoanalysis offered a wide array of solutions to forming a healthy cathartic release of these primal drives (Reich, 1927; Deleuze & Guatarri, 1972). Inevitably, this would be the challenge - the new evolutionary struggle - of the modern human: how can one acknowledge and even release one's primal mindsets, behaviors, and desires while respecting the necessary boundaries of a civilized world?

Starting from a similar theoretical position as Freud, Konrad Lorenz (1963/1966) contests that humans must reconcile the tension between living in a civilized society and repressing basic instincts of survival, reproduction, and the protection of property. Biological predispositions toward fight, flight, protection, reproduction, and safety must be restricted while conducting one's behavior within civilized society. Yet, despite any effort at containment, the instincts exist and seek expression in their full range. There is danger in the repression of these instincts as it can lead to their wanton and spurious release in an unpredictable, vicious, and harmful manner. Ultimately, Lorenz advocates for society to offer and encourage unique outlets for these instincts that allow for healthy release without the violation of social norms of violence and antisocial behavior. Sports would serve as an appropriate outlet for the release of our primal instincts within the laws and social norms established in civilized society.

## **VIOLENCE AND THE DRAW TO SPORT**

There is a body of research examining the role that violence plays in drawing individuals

to the arena of sport. As far back as the 1970's, psychologists were examining the relationship between exercise, arousal, and aggression. Zillman, Katcher, and Milarsky (1972) performed a Milgram-esque experiment on the conditions that would make it likely for a participant to perform a high voltage electrical shock to a peer. Participants were put in different scenarios and then asked to administer the shocks. One of the two groups of participants who delivered the highest levels of electrical shock to their peers were those who were aroused by exercise prior to being asked to administer the shock. The theory that can be drawn from this experiment is that sports, in particular contact sports that involve a high level of arousal and anger, make an individual prone to increased levels of hostile aggression beyond the arena of sport. Ultimately, Zillman and his team concluded that the experience of competing arouses an individual in a way that makes them less averse to violence, hostility, and antisocial behavior, perhaps even luring them toward a propensity for these behaviors after competing or training.

Kerr (1999; 2002; 2005; 2012; 2015) offers research on the potential positive effects of violence, as well as a healthy attraction to violence in contact sport athletes. According to Kerr, the International Society for Sport Psychology (ISSP) incorrectly conflated all forms of violence in sport when they offered an unequivocal stand against all violence in sport in the 1990's (Tenenbaum, et al., 1997; Tenenbaum, et al., 2000). Kerr uses reversal theory (Apter, 2001) to re-conceptualize the motivational processes, social experience, attractions, and pleasures that can realistically be derived from violence in sport in a healthy manner. Reversal theory offers a model of motivation and emotion that focuses on juxtaposing motivational states and individual experiences (e.g., regarding our motivations toward rules, we are driven by a desire to conform and rebel). In the case of sport, our relationships with others are driven by conflicting desires to uphold mastery/dominance and sympathy/care. The individual's ability to change states over time is based off of the ability to fulfill his or her motives within the previous state. In other words, athletes who are able to fulfill their motives around mastery and dominance of others in sport will then be offered space to shift toward an emotional and motivational lens of sympathy toward others (presumably, outside of the arena of sport). The ability to achieve competence in one state is what allows individuals to then reexamine and shift an emotional lens to juxtaposing motivational goals. Finally, a differentiation is made by

Kerr between sanctioned and unsanctioned acts of violence, as well as the type of violence that contact sport athletes engage in versus spectator violence around the sport (e.g. hooliganism in soccer).

Kerr (2012) also examines the nature of sanctioned and unsanctioned violence in the world of rugby, focusing specifically on the renowned and ubiquitous presence of unsanctioned violent behaviors in history of rugby (e.g. biting, eye-gouging, testicle grabbing, and spear tackling, among others). Much of Kerr's previous application of reversal theory to account for sanctioned violence is likewise applied here to account for these acts of unsanctioned violence. However, unique to this text for Kerr is the application of a new term to conceptualize violent behavior in team contact sports: protective or supportive violence. For Kerr, protective/supportive violence is driven by a motivation to defend, rescue, or come to the aid of a teammate within a competitive event. Similar to violence motivated by reversal theory, Kerr explains how an underlying level of pleasure and arousal are derived by teammates who can successfully use protective violence to defend their teammates, rectify an injustice committed by the opponent, or simply terrify the opponent in such a way that harming one's teammates is no longer a rational choice. Finally, Kerr (2015) offers insight into how an attraction to physicality and sanctioned aggression is also present in team contact sports for female athletes. Female athletes found these actions pleasurable and capable of eliciting a high level of arousal. Ultimately, Kerr has overwhelmingly demonstrated the real draw to violent behaviors and tendencies within the sport world, as well as just how aggression and physicality in sport can be perceived as both a singular and positive component of these games.

Woods (2016) examines the potential correlation between domestic violence rates and college athletes and cites several pieces of research showing the increased rates of domestic violence among athletes (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995; Benedict & Klein, 1997; Koss & Gaines, 1993). Contrary to the findings of Zillman, et al., Woods argues that despite presumptions that there is some direct causal link between the mindsets and behaviors formed in sport and a resulting level of violence off the field, it is actually almost impossible to truly tell where the conditioning of violent mindsets and behaviors began with athletes. For example, it is unclear whether a violent upbringing drew the individual to sports or if sports

served to draw violence out of the individual. Yet, despite Woods' speculative conclusions from this study, at least some link drawn between increased levels of domestic violence and athletic participation has been made evident (Morris, 2014) and further empirical research must be committed to this topic to understand what is provoking athletes to be more violent than control populations and why violent individuals are more drawn to athletic endeavors.

There is also a debate in the research over whether or not directed violence in sport can lead to a substantial reduction in ensuing aggressive acts. As mentioned previously with Freud and Lorenz, the notion here is that violence in sport can work as a form of assertion – and, consequently, catharsis – as opposed to aggression. In other words, physical behaviors in sport may be used to establish dominance on the field as opposed to harming the opponent and, consequently, used as a form of catharsis prior to the release of wanton violent behaviors (Thirer, 1994). Only little empirical support has been provided on this theory while a larger portion of experimental data has shown little decrease (and more likely an increase) in violent tendencies after engaging in or witnessing a violent event (Bandura, 1973; Goldstein & Arms, 1971; Arms, Russell, & Sandilands, 1979; Berkowitz 1989).

Social psychology offers concepts such as deindividuation that may offer space to help understand the relationship between sport participation and violence (Festinger, 1952; Zimbardo, 1969). Team sports in particular can provoke a loss of individuality in the arena and, consequently, a loss of responsibility for the behaviors that one pursues. Similar to a riot, the promotion of the team or some higher purpose over the individual might open a space that provokes this individual to engage in violent endeavors and be drawn to hostile behavior in a way that eschews any sense of personal accountability. Also, researchers have argued that the process of socialization should be given serious consideration when examining the etiology of violence and aggression in contact sport athletes (Nucci & Young-Shim, 2005). However, another debate arises when reviewing the socialization and violence in sport literature. Researchers are simply uncertain as to what the definitive affect of socialization in sport will be on the athlete, even in contact sports. In some cases, athletes are socialized to engage in physical and even wanton aggressive behaviors within sport and beyond (Nucci & Young-Shim, 2005). IN others, athletes are taught cooperation, teamwork, obedience, and respect for one's peers while being socialized in sports (Nucci & Young-Shim, 2005; Bloom & Smith, 1996).

Finally, Tenenbaum, et al. (1997 & 2000) argue, that by focusing on deindividuation, reinforcement, and socialization as the source of violence in sport, psychologists are distracted from more plausible causal factors:

There is no need to rehash examples of violence and aggression in sport. The focus should be on the skills demonstrated and strategies employed by athletes and coaches rather than on acts of aggression. There are many sensitive and humane athletes and coaches who are involved in sport at all levels. (Tenenbaum, et al., 1997).

Tenenbaum, et al., argue that a greater examination of *other* factors in sport (e.g. “winning at all costs”) should be in play when attempting to understand how the athlete comes to terms with the inherent violence in sport. The key is to assist those involved in sport to be educated on the greater cultural influences around them and how certain nuances of the game (e.g. violent and assertive behaviors) are uniquely manifest as a result of these demands. Ultimately, it is the motivational mindset by which one pursues sport – as opposed to the sport itself - that correlates with a propensity for violence by an individual. This theory will be returned to in the further discussion section on account of participants in this study saying they enjoyed violence but found ways to use it inside and outside of sport for productive, healthy, and pro-social ends.

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

For this project, nine semi-structured interviews with retired contact sport athletes were completed. The minimum level of experience competing to be considered for the interviews was scholarship-collegiate and/or equivalent elite level participation, with the hope of gathering elite and professional level participants, if possible. The age groups of these athletes varied in range from one to five years after their careers have completed, five to twenty years after their careers have completed, and twenty years or more after their careers have completed. The relative amount of time the athlete has from his career provided some unique nuances to this study, as well as an examination of former athletes at different points in their non-athletic careers. When selecting participants from whom to solicit the data, three in each age/retirement time range were selected.



### ***Procedures Used***

Semi-structured interviews soliciting open-ended responses allowed for the participants to engage a range of questions according to their own experience of transition from a competitive career. These questions attempt to evoke a type of answer that will describe in detail the “what” of the experience for the individual. The hope in asking open ended questions that evoke the lived experience of the athlete is to gather rich, nuanced and detailed descriptions that can ultimately evoke and give rise to grounded codes and cross-data themes.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analytic methodology used for this project is a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2006) espouses a flexible and varying theoretical framework that acknowledges the need to let the data determine the themes and potential theoretical model that may arise. There is no master narrative approach in thematic analysis methodology; the data will always determine the theoretical construct that the analysis must develop. There are likewise very few, if any, theoretical presumptions made by thematic analysis prior to assessing the data sets.

The thematic analysis applied to this data set can be broken down to a five- step process. First, the data were transcribed from the semi-structured interviews. After transcribing the interviews from recording, I moved line-by-line through the transcriptions, combing it for the semantic themes that would arise in the specific descriptions of the participants’ lived experience. Second, meanings were assessed as they arose from the themes and descriptions of the themes were fleshed-out, detailed, and made clear. Third, themes were arranged into categories after comparisons were made among themes. In this step, themes with enough commonality were grouped together into categories. Fourth, higher order categories were formed from a comparison of the meanings that were formed from the themes. These themes served to structure a tree of the data analysis, filling in the branches of these themes with the elucidated meanings and supporting data. Lastly, a final review of the plausibility of the themes selected was assessed.

Thematic analysis ultimately allows space for flexibility in interpreting the data from the interviews. The initial coding phase of the data will espouse a, line-by-line and word-by-word,

analytic and open-ended examination of the text. In this process, codes that arise within one interview and across several interviews are tied into themes as they recur on a consistent basis, generally staying attuned to codes and themes that occur frequently and with consistency. Beyond only examining the consistencies in the data and naming them “themes,” any unique phrases, inconsistencies, or unusual statements offered by the participant become open-game for thematic analysis as well.

With all research, in particular qualitative research, generalizability can be difficult to fully assess. Certainly in this project, the utilization of nine interviews was not intended to provide a definitive picture of generalizable themes. It would be consistent with the history and application of qualitative research to use restraint in presuming the possibility of generalizability.

## **ANALYSIS**

### ***Satisfaction in the Violent Nature of Contact Sports***

I will begin by examining a general theme that applied to many of the participants interviewed for this project: the overall sense of intrinsic satisfaction in violent behaviors, aggressive mindsets, and the ability to display of one’s physical prowess through the venue of contact sports. For the participants who expressed this notion, the ability to be violent and the anticipation of violence in competition were driving forces behind their motivation to compete. These participants expressed that they were comfortable with and held nostalgia for the violent side of contact sports during their competitive career. Several of the participants in this study received only a modest level of financial compensation for competing at an elite level. Yet, they knowingly and willingly continued to expose their body to physical harm in the desire to engage in contact sports.

Paul articulates this sense stating, “*What I do miss is the ability to turn that switch on and lose it, and, legally, do things...I miss that at times.*” In this quote, Paul is expressing how there was an ability offered in contact sports to demonstrate his physical prowess upon opponents. As a former NFL middle linebacker, Paul was praised and rewarded for his ability to deliver violence on his opponent, as well as being isolated from any legal ramifications that would occur if any of these behaviors were demonstrated in civil society. The ability to be

violent regularly, to “legally, do things,” that would be deemed criminal outside of the unique space of the NFL, is remembered fondly and with a sense of nostalgia. Moreover, there is a level of lament over the inability to recover a structured and meaningful release of these aggressive tendencies in their lives after their athletic career in team contact sports.

Paul also describes the process of conjuring violent tendencies as “turning on” and being able to “lose it.” It is valuable to reflect on precisely what is being “turned on” and what is being “lost” here. What is turned on is alluded to – a psychosomatic energy that must be conjured in order to propel one to deliver violence on one’s opponent. Such violent behavior is not something that can occur in the homeostasis of a balanced cognition and a calm nervous system. However, Paul continues, expressing how even though he misses the ability to be violent, he does not live his day-to-day life in a state of rage or aggression: “I was friends, very good friends, with a lot of the guys off the field...But in the game, there was always that switch that just went off and nobody else existed.” In his life after sports, Paul is a school administrator, coach, husband, father of three, and he has never been convicted of a crime. In order to be violent, a specific form of energy must have been conjured prior to contact sport competition. It must also be examined what Paul means when he says he misses the ability to “lose it.” It appears that Paul is referring to a releasing of energy that is continuously restricted or limited as a result of the laws, societal norms, and restrictions of his responsibilities in a civilized society. Outside of the singular vacuum of contact sports and the NFL, Paul cannot behave in a way that releases emotional and physical energy resulting from violent mindsets and behaviors. What is “let go” is the clear range of emotions and behaviors that must be severely held in check in his civilized life outside of football.

Along similar lines, when asked what he enjoyed about these violent and aggressive opportunities in his career, Paul expresses:

Probably the ability to hit, or really do whatever I wanted and get away with it... And the satisfaction of just, you know, hitting somebody and the sound, the bloom, the blam, it just...and you’re getting away with it and you’re getting paid to do it!

There are several important nuances to this passage. First, Paul reiterates a point made previously about the blurred lines of law and order when it comes to what was acceptable in

the arena of contact sports. He relished the ability to, “*do whatever I wanted and get away with it.*” Second, Paul was intrinsically satisfied with the process of distributing violence. Even the sheer sound of violence is missed in his life after the NFL. Lastly, he speaks to the promotion of violence in these arenas. Though it is clear that Paul enjoyed violence for its own sake, the fact that his prowess in his ability to be violent is paid only promotes and reinforces what were already antisocial tendencies. This seems to speak to the middle ground in the debate offered in the literature review between whether individuals are initially drawn to violence or if it is social conditions that propel one into violence. In the case of Paul, it appears as if both theories have relevance.

Lastly, for Paul, even the process of training for athletic competition was a violent endeavor that he enjoyed, expressing pride and satisfaction over how he would literally calcify his body by throwing it into trees during the offseason so that when he hit the field he would be less vulnerable to the pain he was hoping to inflict. He says:

*“I was probably a nut when I did it. I was one of those guys who used to run through the woods as fast as you can. Hit trees, bounce off, line up against trees and throw forearms there. So I know that if I can get them bruised enough, I knew I wouldn’t feel it when the time came.”*

Paul is unequivocal about his pursuit of violent endeavors in these passages. Though he has come to terms with a civilized form of existence, Paul clearly had and has an attraction to aspects of violence that were offered in a career in contact sports.

Ryan expresses a similar sense of nostalgia for inflicting physical harm on his opponents during his athletic career. When asked about what he will miss most from his contact sports career, Ryan states, “*Just letting that emotion go. That fire... going out there and drilling somebody, you just can’t do that. You’ve got to learn to control it.*” Ryan describes this experience – inflicting physical harm on the opponent in competition – as satisfying and how its loss is now lamented. Similar to Paul, Ryan concedes that there is a substantial release of his emotions in contact sport competition – a real letting go. This alludes to the reality of constriction around his emotions in most venues outside of contact sports. Ryan also expresses that there is a larger range of emotions available as a contact sport athlete to he

must now, regrettably, learn to control. Ultimately, Ryan was drawn to the side of contact sports that allowed for this unconstrained release of emotion and behavior. Now in retirement, he must find ways to mitigate the release of such otherwise antisocial tendencies.

According to Henry, contact sports offered a mindset that early in his life he recognized would resonate with him – performing with a sense of “reckless abandon” for his body on the field. He states, “*Oh, yeah. I played with reckless abandon. They called it, ‘reckless abandon’...I said, ‘shit, well that’s right up my alley.’*” Put succinctly, Henry expresses pride in his ability to use his body as a source of violence in particular circumstances in football that call for the most extreme demonstrations of toughness and grit. He continues, expressing how “*I could come off the corner and blow up the tackle. They were thinking someone was gonna put a move on them and I would come right up under them and put my hat on their chin.*” The ability to play this style of football was a badge of honor of sorts for Henry. He had the courage and demeanor that was imperative for the most difficult tasks on the field. He was able to conjure the level of physical violence and “reckless abandon” that was imperative to succeed in very specific tasks that were highly dangerous and usually overlooked by unknowing spectators. Contact sports require a large range of skills from its participants, but almost all contact sport athletes will candidly acknowledge that at least a few players on each team have to take on these extra violent and courage-conjuring feats within the game. Some sports, in particular hockey and football, have even separated distinct categories of defining these players as “enforcers” or “trench busters,” respectively. Henry had a unique form of power derived from this singular skill set. He took pride in his ability to stand in this separate category of an extraordinary level of toughness. Ultimately, he relished the opportunity to take on the most dangerous and violent jobs on the field. He did not doubt his ability to play with “reckless abandon.”

### ***The Possession of a “Switch”***

In this study, participants expressed the emotional possession of what they termed a “switch.” In short, this was an ability participants cultivated when they had to shift back and forth between life on the field and life off the field. In order to successfully compete in the elite level contact sports, train for competition at that level, and execute violent behaviors and

mindsets toward the opponent, participants offer insight into the psychological process of being able to cognitively shift gears between different motivational states. Discussing the nuances of this “switch” is vital for two reasons. First, it offers insight into the lived experience of preparing for violence. This can aid in understanding why participants are so attracted to violent tendencies and situations in the first place. Secondly, these passages will reveal just how extra-ordinary the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional experiences of violent tendencies were for participants. Violent encounters allowed for a unique space that demanded traits and skills that were rarely conjured in the vast majority of their lives outside of contact sports.

Paul articulates his experience of this “switch” and precisely how this mindset occurs prior to competition. Paul states:

*“When I played my career in the NFL and even in college, there is ability within contact (sport) athletes, and I always refer to it as a switch. When my foot hits the field, there is a switch, and internal switch that goes on inside. Basically, you fear nothing, you feel nothing, and you are out there doing a job. And when you do that job, the adrenaline, the drug, whatever you want to call that happens to you when you are out there doing that...phew...I don’t know if there is another thing out there that can ever simulate it. And when you come off the field, that switch goes off. And in my playing days, that was very easy.”*

Paul offers insight into how the lived experience of “flipping the switch” occurs. Upon entering the arena of competition, feeling his feet touch the grass, and standing tall in the stadium with competition looming, Paul expresses the unconscious and fluid ability to tap this emotional valve of energy. It is important to note that for Paul, this experience does seem to be occurring somewhat outside of his autonomy. Yet, despite this seeming lack of control, this “switch” is confined to the arena. Just as fluidly as the valve is turned on, it is able to shut off, allowing for space to perform obligations where this mindset might be detrimental. It would seem more difficult to transition between developing an ability to feel nothing and fear nothing, unleashing violence upon his opponents, and then moving back into a social space of civility and accord with his peers. However, Paul seems to have developed an awareness of the confines of these mindsets and behaviors. The phrase Paul uses to describe just how irregular

his awareness becomes when the switch goes off - “feeling nothing and fearing nothing” - must be understood within the context of his reference to the experience as a drug. In short, this “feeling nothing” is not some ascetic ability to deny oneself the experience of pain or fear but is closer to the feeling of limitless possibility one might experience on a stimulant or psychedelic drug. Paul also describes this experience as just being “out there doing a job.” This speaks to just how simultaneously rudimentary and surreal this experience was for him. This feeling of tapping into a reserve of power, courage, violence, and ecstasy on a weekly basis was just what he was paid to do. He took pride in being consistent and reliable in his ability to execute this emotional rush the way an electrician might in the ability to properly rewire a reliable lighting system. Ultimately, he concedes that there is a deep allure in these experiences and that no other experience can and ever will replicate the experience of feeling the switch go off prior to competition.

John expresses, similar to Paul, how the capacity to possess the ability to switch his cognitive and emotional state quickly was incredibly conducive to successful performance in the arena of contact sport competition. However, after his career in football, John found that this same emotional tendency would get turned on in his professional work environment and become detrimental. He offers an anecdote from his experience in an office environment at his first job after retirement:

*“I get fired up real quickly and things set me off real easily. So you think about that in football – offensive guard talks crap to me, I’m fired up and I’m going after him on the next play. You transition that to the workforce, and my boss says something to me that I don’t like and I’m jacked up. I think that’s something that honestly is one of the biggest things that I’m trying to work on, my ability not to get so fired up and jacked up about things. I know when I start getting in that place, you ask any football player, its great when I’m playing, getting fired up before a football game, that’s awesome. But when it happens and I’m in my office and the printer’s broken or something like this and I started flying off the handle, then we have a serious issue.”*

In some ways similar to Paul, John acknowledges his capacity to experience cognitive and emotional shifts that are beyond his control and may occur quickly. Though not as clear in his attraction to this capacity, John does concede that this ability to “flip the switch” was

quite helpful within the context of contact sport competition. John inevitably, expressed lament over these spontaneous shifts in cognition and emotion. He senses that it was irresponsible and misplaced to allow this emotional turn to occur outside of the context of contact sport competition. Lastly, the aspect of these shifts as extra-ordinary begins to take shape in this passage. John's day-to-day experience after football makes these outbursts bizarre, out of place, and irresponsible.

Ray articulates how both as an athlete and in his post-athletic career transition, he enjoys the process and experience of "battling" an opponent. He explains how he "never turned down a battle," and derived satisfaction from experiencing this process of emotionally and consciously shifting gears from civil, tranquil, and composed to angry, vengeful, and intense. Ray offers a recent anecdote of this tendency in his personal life:

*"I played (golf) with a guy two weeks ago. This guy was probably a little bit better golfer than me. I respected the guy, but the guy was an idiot. I played pretty well but he beat me, right? So we played him again yesterday. Now, he pissed me off. I was struggling with the front 9, not hitting the ball the way I like. He asked me what my handicap was and I said, "well, maybe a 10." And he kind of started laughing, like, "your not a 10." I started looking at the guys like this guy is arrogant. So I get pissed. The back 9, I get up and I start just hammering the ball. I was pissed off. I birdied the first two holes and beat him in the back 9. I love that feeling; looove (sic)that feeling."*

In the example provided, a peer Ray is golfing with primes him for the inevitable quick switch. Ray's opponent demonstrates what he interprets to be arrogance and a lack of respect. Ray switched gears in the middle of the match, shifting from cordial and civil day of golf with colleagues to vicious and exacting with his now enemy. This abrupt shift in cognition and emotion allows Ray to raise his golf game, as he acknowledges playing better against an enemy than a colleague. Ultimately, Ray enjoys the process of proving his arrogant peer wrong, and, at least on some level, shaming him. Later in the interview, Ray goes on to express, at least in hindsight of these experiences, some level of lament: "Sometimes you need to know when to walk away." Nonetheless, the intoxication of exacting revenge and distributing justice on an "arrogant" foe continues to draw Ray back to the behavior. Despite being later in life and well beyond his athletic career, Ray finds himself allured to this aggressive shift in thinking.



He “loves that feeling“ of – real or not - perceiving his peers as hostile and aggressively engaging them in competition.

### ***Contact as catharthis***

For participants in this study, competition in contact sports offered a unique emotional release. The vast majority of participants expressed how the greatest experience in their lives had occurred in sports and that they were unlikely to replicate the magnitude of satisfaction found in these experiences outside of sports. Though this is not a paper focusing on peak experiences, it must be noted that the arena of contact sports opens space for a singular range of emotions that are not readily available in a civilized world. It is worthwhile to explore nuances of these emotions. Contact sports offer a unique venue to release aggression, intimidation, and courage, as well as to engage in violent behavior in a legal, condoned, and promoted context. However, much of the discussion around peak and flow experiences in sport focuses on the Pollyanna description of these experiences (joy, elation, ecstasy, peace, unity, etc.) (Maslow 1962/1968; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When considering what flow or peak experiences might look like for a contact sport athlete, a broader and more diverse palette of descriptions should be considered. Participants in this section will demonstrate the diversity and range of some of the emotions unique to participation in contact sports, as well as revealing the attraction to such endeavors.

Troy discusses how his experience of stress levels has raised since he has retired from a career in contact sports. He also expresses how the physical, violent, and aggressive nature of these sports allowed a space for a unique emotional release that lowered his tension levels at the time. He discusses this loss of release:

*“I had more patience when I was in college and playing a contact sport. (Now) I don’t get to release any aggravation or aggression that I want. I definitely get more stressed now than I used to...It was just the fact of having the release whenever you wanted it because you’re out hitting guys 24-7. Contact sports and the working world, they are just completely different.”*

Troy describes how in an elite level career in football, “*whenever you want to, you are out there hitting guys 24-7.*” One of the key notions to understand here is the line “whenever you want to,” emphasizing that there is a relatively regular experience of the opportunity to indulge some of his emotional drives by engaging in physical contact and some form of controlled violence. His career now - working in a biotech laboratory - has fundamentally shifted his ability to engage in this outlet, as there is really no form conflict, aggression, or violence even on a social or emotional level. Earlier in the interview, he expressed how even engaging with his colleagues and coworkers on some emotionally challenging level or with some form of social struggle toward a united goal has been difficult to reconstruct (i.e. he was met with disdain when he had asked his coworkers to sacrifice personal time and work overtime on a project he designed to treat cancer cells). For Troy, there was something healthy about aggression, competition, and physicality that would curb any general stress levels he felt through the course of a week. In retirement, there exists a vacuum for the regular emotional releases experienced in the aggression and physicality of football. Ultimately, this results in increased stress levels, a higher sense of irritability, and a pervasive sense of agitation in his workplace.

Ryan speaks to a similar issue, expressing simply and candidly that football was an outlet for aggressive and passionate expressions:

*“Just letting that emotion go. That fire...just the passion for playing, going out there and drilling somebody. You just can’t do that. You’ve got to learn to control it. You can’t walk in between the white lines anymore so you’ve got to learn to control your emotions when things in life get you going.”*

When asked if he wished that there were more opportunities in his life where he could allow his emotions to let free of restraints, Ryan responded pithily and directly:

*“Yeah, yeah...”*

As Ryan expresses here, it can be challenging to navigate these volatile expressions of emotion outside of the arena of contact sports. He articulates this succinctly – between the white lines, emotions are allowed to be let out and let loose. In his own estimation, Ryan’s

emotional life is given a space to express itself in its fullest sense without any form of mitigation in the arena of contact sports. When following up with him on the value of this space for release, he expresses his desire that this proper context for emotional release would return. Ultimately, with Ryan, we are offered our initial invitation into the nature of this catharsis – the full expression of his emotions will only ever exist between the white lines of contact sports. Accessing such a wide range of emotions that are so rare in the rest of his life outside of sport made the violent aspects of contact sports alluring to Ryan.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION**

The results of this research resonate deeply with the conclusions offered in Kerr's two decades of research on the topic of violence in sport. Ultimately, participants in this study - all former team contact sport athletes – found a significant sense of arousal, pleasure, and meaning in the experience of aggressive and physical mindsets and behaviors offered in contact sports. Also similar to much of Kerr's research, the participants in this study were not decidedly violent people in their lives outside of sport. Though they enjoyed physicality and aggression within the arena of competition, none of these participants had criminal records and few were prone to wanton outbursts in their life and relationships outside of sport. A serious consideration of Kerr's application of reversal theory to make sense of this complicated relationship to violence appears to be appropriate with these participants.

However, the question remains - what is it about the lived experience of violence in contact sports that is so alluring to participants regardless of the potential health consequences? This is a theme that was broached in the introduction via psychoanalytic theory, in particular in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, but demands closer examination. None of the participants in this study expressed a desire to demonstrate violence in a haphazard manner, though some did fear the possibility of how quickly these mindsets and behaviors could be reenacted in a context outside of the competitive arena. Yet, after their athletic careers, participants lamented the vacuum for these mindsets and behaviors. In their lives outside of sport, there was no adequate context to demonstrate their most honored, celebrated, and powerful skills – courage in the face of physical fear, dominance, intimidation, imposing their will upon an opponent, and embodied sacrifice for the greater purpose of the

team and victory. The desire to turn this mindset on and let this power be enacted was deeply alluring to many of these participants and was present in the athlete well after his career has been terminated.

Ultimately, this dialogue will move in three distinct but related directions. First, it is imperative that psychology continues to probe into the phenomenon of why so many athletes are drawn with such ease toward the violent mindsets and behaviors present in contact sports. Is it only financial reward that drives individuals into careers in contact sports, or is it possible that there is some deeper draw to careers and experiences founded in violence? Secondly, it will be of deep value - for the sake of intervention efforts - to examine whether or not there are any possible outlets in civil society beyond contact sports that can allow for a similar catharsis without actually demanding the literal reenactment of such antisocial mindsets and behaviors. Lastly, the results of this study could possibly be extended to military populations and the psychosocial struggles that combat veterans face in their reintegration to civilian life.

Regarding the draw of violence, much of the research will offer two possible concepts of etiology. First, sociology and criminology have demonstrated the effect that poverty and depressed socioeconomic circumstances have as fertile grounds for recruiting an individual into behaviors, mindsets, and cultures of violence (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993). Derived from this, it could be presumed that it is the significant financial reward that motivates individuals to compete in contact sports despite the risks. Secondly, as already mentioned in the introduction, social psychology has thoroughly examined for decades the effect of auto mimicry and interpersonal influence that occurs when individuals are regularly exposed to violent behaviors. Despite the value of these theories in application to some aspects of this draw to violence, they lack in providing a framework to make sense of any original draw that violence, physicality, and aggression may have on individuals prior to conditioning. In other words, is it possible that outside of conditioning and mimicry, violence offers something inherently attractive to humans? Furthermore, why are so many individuals continually drawn to contact sports despite any guarantee of financial reward or security? Roughly .1% of all contact sport athletes are ever significantly financially rewarded for their efforts. For those who are, their professional careers last anywhere from three to six years, on average. Put bluntly, for the overwhelming majority of those who play contact sports, competing with the

intention of obtaining financial security is not a rational calculation.

Psychodynamic theories present unique and even slightly divergent conceptualizations of this primordial draw to violence: Freud's notion of *thanatos* (1922); Lacan's notion of *jouissance* (1975); Deleuze's differentiation between masochistic and sadistic violence (1991), stand out among others. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to broach a review detailing the nuances of these concepts, it is important to note that a review of the history and theory of psychology seriously considers the pervasive draw of violent tendencies and considers their presence in the individual's psyche as primary. Nevertheless, on the topic of the primary condition of humanity, Freud offers the following reflection:

It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct...The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. (Freud, 1930/1962, p. 32)

Conjuring this history of theory, considering its implications, and researching the validity of this claim that the draw to violence is a primary instinct that drives human behavior must be taken seriously by psychologists who study violence. Psychology must eschew the tendency to only explain violence as either the result of conditioning, extrinsic motivation, or, even worse, mere psychopathy. As individuals continue to pursue all sorts of violence devoid of the clear results of conditioning and reward, psychology must attempt to understand the original nature of this drive.

A second discussion must be broached here, inquiring into whether or not there exist any outlets in civil society that can allow for a similar catharsis without actually demanding the full reenactment of violent mindsets and behaviors. This may be the most difficult psychological avenue to navigate therapeutically moving forward. Though it seems possible that the individual could undergo some form of cognitive reappraisal toward the event of violence – i.e. some sort of “that was then and this is now” or “different seasons of life” mindset which offers different contexts of behavior - many athletes leave the arena of sport quite

young. The desire, motivation, and learned association to reenact aspects of their former career may be resounding. Thus, it should not be confounding when former contact sport athletes act so readily upon these former behaviors and employ these former mindsets.

However, as one participant put it in this study, there appears to be a potential sublimation of the energy that can occur in pro-social and non-violent contexts. Paul was a former NFL middle linebacker and was unequivocal about the level of satisfaction he found in holding a career that promoted and rewarded his ability to display violent mindsets and behaviors on a regular basis. After leaving the NFL, he found himself wandering through a career in sales before settling into the career that would ultimately land him a position in the hall of fame – middle school administration (he was recently inducted into the school's hall of fame for his service and efforts). Paul loved this work, found it deeply meaningful, and expressed a desire to be successful in it on par with his longing to display physical domination on an NFL field. Furthermore, Paul expressed how he felt similar mindsets and social engagements were available in working with children as were available to his career in the NFL. The transfer here was on the grounds of honesty and authenticity – two of the results of living in the midst of high-risk circumstances and violent endeavors. In other words, there was a taste of his former mindsets, perhaps the result of a level of symbolic violence, which can be made real when humans have honest and hard conversations about how they will navigate the struggles of life.

Paul still misses violence; he is lured to it as so many in this study and in American culture are. Yet, as an administrator charged with the daunting task of connecting sincerely with young people, mentoring their motivations, and guiding their behavior through a critical period of development, he has found an outlet that conjures enough aspects of his old, satisfying way of thinking. Despite the curious relationship on the surface between being equally satisfied as an NFL linebacker and a middle school administrator, psychology should take seriously the possibility that there are healthy psychosocial outlets for these otherwise antisocial tendencies.

Lastly, it seems that there is a space opened to provoke further inquiry from this study to populations outside of sport, in particular, military populations and the psychosocial

struggles that combat veterans might face in their reintegration to civilian life. Sebastian Junger attempts to account for the profound draw to violence through the release of adrenaline. Before investigating the draw to violence in military personnel, he offers statistics and basic neurological principles behind the most dangerous American occupation – just existing as an adolescent male. He writes:

(Young men) are killed in accidents and homicides at a rate of 106 per 100,000 per year;. Statistically, it's six times as dangerous to spend a year as a young men in America than as a cop or a fireman, and vastly more dangerous than a one-year deployment at a big military base in Afghanistan. You'd have to go to a remote firebase to find a level of risk that surpasses that of simply being an adolescent male back home. The basic neurological mechanism that induces mammals to do things is called the dopamine reward system. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that mimics the effect of cocaine in the brain. When the men of Second Platoon were moping around the outpost hoping for a firefight it was because, among other things, they weren't getting their accustomed dose of endorphins and dopamine. (Junger, 2010, p. 238)

Junger is broaching the data for a larger, broader, and more nuanced conversation that the history of theory in psychology takes seriously and may be able to theoretically conceptualize. It would be inappropriate to conflate careers in these two fields. One involves the immanent presence of death while the other does not. Nonetheless, further inquiry into the role that losing the loss of outlets for aggressive and high-risk behavior, as well as losing the solidarity forged in these endeavors may have on these populations is worth examination. Future research could provide early-intervention techniques that, if successful in one population, may be appropriately applied to the other.

Such a large portion of the current research and debate regarding the struggles that contact sport athletes face in their career transitions has focused on the results of head trauma and identity foreclosure. This line of research is absolutely appropriate in the effort toward unlocking the biological and cognitive etiology of behaviors, mindsets, and symptoms this population may face after their career in contact sports. Yet, it is just as essential to offer insight into the lived experience of these individuals. By doing so, this study was able to

elucidate the psychological draw that violence has on individuals and how contact sports offer a promotion of these emotions, mindsets, and behaviors.

It is shortsighted for psychology to overlook the effect that the release and reinforcement of violent tendencies can play on an individual when he or she is attempting to return to a civil society. Psychodynamic theory has offered the concept that violent mindsets, tendencies, and behaviors are profoundly alluring to individuals in a range of human activity. Yet, beyond this primordial draw to violence, individuals who played contact sports were encouraged, reinforced, and financially rewarded to perform behaviors in their athletic career that are now neither appropriate nor legal in American culture. When athletes express that they lament the loss of violent mindsets and instincts that they can no longer conjure on a regular basis, psychology ought to take this seriously and investigate the ramifications of these mindsets on the athlete's life after sports.

At a minimum, further research on the alluring nature of violence and aggression deserves more qualitative examination. As a culture, it would be appropriate to take seriously the fact that we are profoundly entertained by these individuals based off of their ability to demonstrate power, physical dominance, and violence at the highest levels of human potency. We then ask these individuals to leave this arena and obey the same civil laws of engagement that they were paid and praised to obliterate in their careers. Sensitivity to this cultural (spectators) and individual (performers) attraction to violence is essential.



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